

For Here Is Rest

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/7216243) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/7216243>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Turn (TV 2014) , 18th Century CE RPF
Relationship:	Benjamin Tallmadge/George Washington , Past Benjamin Tallmadge/Nathan Hale , Past George Washington/Martha Washington , Adrienne de Lafayette/Gilbert du Motier Marquis de Lafayette
Character:	Benjamin Tallmadge , George Washington , Adrienne de Lafayette , Gilbert du Motier Marquis de Lafayette , Nathan Hale , Martha Washington , Mopsey , Anna Strong , Alexander Hamilton , Elizabeth "Eliza" Schuyler , William Bradford
Additional Tags:	Tiny House AU , Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Healing , Implied/Referenced Character Death , Car Accidents , The Saddest Ikea Trip Ever , Blood , accidental injury , Heights Adjusted For Inflation , Panic Attacks , Dogs , Homophobia , Semi-Public Sex , Frottage , body image issues , Brief mentions of suicide
Series:	Part 1 of Build your Own World
Collections:	Finished reading
Stats:	Published: 2016-06-16 Completed: 2017-03-03 Chapters: 26/26 Words: 82784

For Here Is Rest

by [Nimravidæ](#)

Summary

After a devastating personal loss, Benjamin Tallmadge retreats from the life he knew in Connecticut. Seeking solace, he finds himself in rural Virginia fixing up a small house with only the company of the surrounding woods and his reclusive widower landlord, George Washington.

"Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. Build, therefore, your own world."

Notes

The Tiny House AU! Dedicated dearly to [Catalpa-Waltz](#) and [imakeyoubutter](#)

Rating, Tags and Warnings subject to change by chapters.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Come to the woods, for here is rest. There is no repose like that of the green deep woods. Here grow the wallflower and the violet. The squirrel will come and sit upon your knee, the logcock will wake you in the morning. Sleep in forgetfulness of all ill.” - John Muir, 1869

Dust kicks up under the wheels of a deceptively beat-up pick up. Even with its bed filled with boxes, all bungee-corded down and covered liberally in a few tarps, the beast of a vehicle bumps without complaint down the weathered dirt road.

It had roared to life under Ben’s trembling hands at five-thirty that morning, slipping with the sunrise from New Haven and leaving a trail burning down 95. Speeding through Pennsylvania and Jersey like he could outrun his memories if he pressed hard enough on the gas.

Like seven hours on the interstate and 406 miles could erase the last five years and ten months and leave it all at the open gate and the little line of three mailboxes that he nearly misses with his eyes glued to the half-furled map on his passenger seat. He’d marked out the path meticulously in the emptiness of his cleaned out New Haven apartment and followed it up with a looping scrawl of directions, just to be sure he wouldn’t have to dig his phone out of his glove compartment.

Ben really doesn’t want to deal with the near-endless buzzing of well-wishers leaving him voicemails and sympathetic emails from his old job telling if he *wants to come back, there’s always a place* , or, even worse, the onslaught of texts from Anna or Caleb or even Abe asking him just what the fuck he was doing - as if they didn’t already know.

They were patting his shoulder at the funeral, promising whatever he needs. Though it seems that didn’t extend to understanding that he *had* to leave.

He doesn’t miss the turn, but it’s close. The unwavering sunlight had glinted off the top of one of the mailboxes to draw his attention just long enough to see it, though, he supposes missing it wouldn’t have been that much of a catastrophe.

It wasn’t like he’d seen another car making its way down the way for the last few miles. His sole companion had been the swollen pink, red and yellow peaches that hang heavy from motionless trees in the sticky July heat.

And even they put him at distance as he passes through the break in them to as his engine cuts through the buzzing and a passing glance at the box that caught his attention only confirms he’s at the right place.

Only two have names, one bearing the surname of the man he’d talked to more than a few times, an energetic Frenchman by the name of Lafayette. He sounded sure, spoke with confidence (and at length) about the land, all the things Ben could ever think to want from it, just as much as he did about all the technical details of cost, square footage and the status of the little run-down house tucked up into the corner.

The second, the owner himself. Elusive enough that Ben had thought there was just a misprint in the advertisement and Lafayette himself was the sole proprietor - he was corrected soon on that front.

“Oh, no - I only work for Mister Washington, I handle all his business on his behalf,” He had

explained with the recited ease of someone who's had to say the same sentence countless times.
"He approves applications, I handle the rest."

Once upon a time, Ben would've called it a godsend, stumbling across a short piece for the small slice of land deep into Virginia - but fate has proved itself a much more fickle mistress indeed, and now Ben doesn't know what to call it.

Chance? Luck? Something. That is certainly though, it is something.

In the distance, the large farmhouse creeps closer into view. White painted, it looks almost like part of a painting, perfectly positioned against the backdrop of distant peach trees and red-dotted tomato fields all reaching up to a clear blue sky. The main road splits ahead just before it, one path twisting towards a garage, another farther down past the house and towards the back of the property.

"When you arrive, the first home is our generous landlords - stay on the other, I will meet you at the end of the it."

Lafayette's instructions well in mind, Ben moseys slowly past, drinking in the sights around him. It isn't until his vision swings back around near to the house that he notices someone on the porch and nearly jerks his wheel in shock. A man leans against a support post, unflinching and unmoving in the sweltering heat (even through Ben's A/C he can still feel the sweat beading at his temples).

He fixes Ben with an unreadable look and, as if to convince him fully that he isn't some statue put up to scare away intruders, lifts his mug to drink from it - not looking away.

The occasional radio broadcasts he flicked through didn't mention anything about axe-murderers, but that doesn't soothe him at all. Ben looks to the road to keep himself from veering off it, but he gets the strongest feeling the stranger on the porch hasn't looked away yet.

He fights the cold chill down his spine all the way down the much less worn road. He's earlier than when he'd told Lafayette he would be there, but there's already a well-ridden pick-up waiting, two forms leaning against it.

He gets that churning sensation in his gut. Surely that second person can't be the landlord, right?

Then who was on the porch staring him down?

Ben shakes the train of thought and the spike of anxiety as he shifts to park and slip out on numb, tingling legs. Maybe he should've stopped more along the way to stretch them out, but the thought of lingering any closer to his old home made him almost sick with regret.

The first thing he notices, with one hand steadied on the almost too-hot metal of his hood, is that the person waiting with Lafayette was most certainly *not* the mysterious George Washington. Though, the sharpness in her eyes wasn't as relaxing as that prospect.

She offers a sharp once-over, and, in a notably familiar accent, asked, "Benjamin Tallmadge?"

With all her attention poised at him, for just the moment, Ben nearly takes a step back - like her slightly-tilted head and intent look could pierce through right to read what he's running from. He scratches his elbow with his other hand and, before he can respond to tell her that he is - and just Ben's fine - the only person here whose name he actually knows circles around with a wide grin.

"Mister Tallmadge!" He speaks clearer than he had on the phone, sharp and paced to compensate for his thick accent.

“The drive was not too difficult, I hope,” and before Ben can answer, the lithe man takes him by the shoulders and pulls Ben to stumble closer.

The woman's eyes burn into him as Ben wriggles vainly out of the Frenchman's grasp, two fast kisses pressed to his cheek, before he is finally released with a breezy, “so good to meet.”

He gestures to her, either oblivious to or ignoring Ben's heated cheeks, “Adrienne, my wife. She cares for the horses and keeps us all from making too much of a ruin of everything. She looks at everyone like that, do not take personal offence.” The playful barb sneaks a softness onto her carefully trained features and, for a second, Ben believes him.

“So, Mister Tallmadge” Lafayette slips back in, gesturing back towards the house and the softness freezes back over in an instant. This time Ben manages to interrupt.

“Ben, just Ben is fine.”

He hums. “In that case, Gilbert, will be more acceptable, no? A first name for a first name - as we will be neighbors shortly enough.”

Neighbors? Ben shifts himself closer to the house and tries to ignore the way his shirt is sticking to his back and making him feel rather painfully disgusting baking under the sun.

“Talk inside, Gilbert,” Adrienne says from her place beside them, looking wholly unbothered. “You do not want your new friend to melt. It would look bad on the next advertisements.”

She looks at him like mouthing thank you would be wholly inappropriate, so he just offers her a sheepish smile instead. She gives a nod, and slips forward smoothly, brushing gently beside her husband and holding up the keys she must've plucked from his jean pocket, going to unlock it while Lafayette (Gilbert, he tries to correct himself) gesticulates his speech with wild, long limbs.

“Though I cannot promise much better inside, the generator has not been turned on in a while - it may take time to cool, if it still works at all.” While he talks, Ben drinks in both the sight and the information.

The house itself was properly tiny - exactly what he was looking for with one combined living room and a small, compact kitchen and a loft for a bed and little more. It's exactly what he wants. Exactly what he *needs*.

From the outside, though, it does look a mess. The porch, clearly built after the miniscule house was, slants at a strange angle and hardly looks like it could withstand the weight of a raindrop, let alone a full-grown man. The wood looks like it once had a nice luster, but has since turned a gray mottled with dark spots.

“That should be fixed, though we are not ones to judge.” Gilbert says as he notices Ben looking at it. “And yes, the outside could use some paint but she will make a lovely home. He gestures Ben to follow up the creaking, clearly weak steps and up into the welcoming entrance.

Weak light filters in through large, filthy windows, immediately into the empty living space. It smells like dust and a tinge of mildew under a faint whisper of woodsmoke. While it was better to be out from the sun, the air was still stale and hot inside.

To the right is a brick fireplace only big enough to hold a few smaller logs. The trail of the chimney breaks up the smoothness of the off-white walls - to his left the entrance to a compact kitchen, thankfully retaining its oven and refrigerator.

It doesn't sprawl, it doesn't gape with empty room - the ceiling isn't vaulted high above his head. It's perfect. Directly across is the outline of one of the features listed in the advertisement, a table that folds down from the wall - big enough to seat three or four people at a push but Ben already knows he'll be using it more as a desk.

Three people in it already seems like the place is reaching max capacity, and Adrienne shoulders open a window to let in a bit of fresher air which, in turn, lets in a bit more light.

Ben hasn't fallen in love this fast in five years.

"The bathroom is through there," Gilbert tells him with another meticulously practiced ease, pointing around the corner to a closed door just past a row of counters through the kitchen. "It should be," he gestures vaguely, "functional. Though if you would like for some professional opinions, I have the numbers of many capable... capable..." He trails off with a few more sweeping movements of his hand.

Ben, trying his damndest to at least be useful, "Professionals? Plumbers, electricians... handymen?"

"*Oui*, yes, handymen. Thank you. You do not speak French at all, do you?" He sounds almost desperate and Ben really wishes he could recall enough of his high school class to say yes.

Gilbert sags just a little when he shakes his head, but doesn't let it linger. "You will learn," he sounds assured in himself as he points up to the loft - the wooden ladder that leads to it pushed up and in its locked position. He tells him all about the windows.

Pushed in to allow for more space, the loft fits a king at a squeeze but a queen or a full is most recommended. Adrienne remains quiet, almost blending into the background enough for Ben to forget she was there.

Which only served to remind him of the man.

Another strange sensation fills the pit of his stomach as he recalls the feeling of those sharp, intense eyes following him. "La-uh-Gilbert?"

He hums in response, still tilting his head back to get a good look up at the loft apparently. Ben, standing beside him, finds himself an inch or so shorter and missing whatever has transfixed him.

"Would that have been Mr. Washington I saw on my way in? At the main house?" He watches the man's profile as his brow furrows and he turns to face him.

"George? He knows you are coming today, I told him last night, did I not?" That question's probably only half rhetorical as he directs it back over his shoulder towards Adrienne. "He is not one for greetings."

"Oh, he didn't greet me, mostly just stared."

"Yes, for him that is greeting," Gilbert thinks for a moment. "What did he look like?"

He'd only seen him for a fleeting second, but the image seared itself to the inside of his mind so much so that if he tries, he's sure he can pick out all the little details of his chipped and worn mug, his dusty boots, his broad shoulders and thick hands.

Gilbert looks at him expectantly and he realizes he'd been quiet for a little too long. "Reddish hair? Kinda tall, broad." He really hopes that's not too much detail.

Raising his hand comically high above his head, Gilbert asks, “this tall?”

“Thereabout, sure.” Ben’s lips almost twitched to a smile. Almost.

“Then yes! It seems you have caught your first glance of the elusive George Washington. I do not expect you to see much more of him, though if you wish to, he harvests from his personal gardens very early in the morning and spends much of his time working within his home. Though I cannot think of a reason in which you must go to him instead of to me or Adri,” He waves it off, though, and Ben tucks his hands in his pockets for lack of anywhere else to have them.

Gilbert did say neighbors, which seemed to imply they lived close, but houses seemed so few and far between here. Though they’re name was on the mailbox as well... but he hadn’t seen anywhere else around, “Do you two live near?”

Both nod in response, but Adrienne, shockingly, answers instead. “We live in a house on the eastern edge of George’s property, closer to the stable. This is the west. The trees do not mark the edge of his land, we are just beyond them, though if you need us calling would be quicker than attempting to find the right road through them.”

With the longest sentence she’s spoken, Ben realizes her accent is far thicker than Gilbert’s, though still practiced and refined in the language. He doesn’t comment, he just thinks. “Does anyone else live on his property?”

“It is just the four of us now,” Gilbert says, giving the wall a solid pat. “The man who built this decided it was not for him. He moved to California a few years ago, left this poor thing in its disrepair. But you will breathe new life into her.” And abruptly, “Would you like help moving your things?”

“Thanks? And that would be great, actually. If you don’t mind.” Better to fill the empty space. Ben didn’t bring much - or really anything from their old apartment. He couldn’t bare to bring the bed, or the old nightstands or even the couch.

So instead he had a few boxes of clothes, some dishes and kitchen stuff (all of the tacky, cute thrift-store finds that Nate thought were hilarious were in storage in New Haven. He couldn’t bring those either).

Anna disapproved of the move, but she still bought him a few decorative little vases, a few nice photographs of cityscapes (*in case you miss them*).

He brought his books though. Even the ones with Nate’s familiar scrawling script in the margins and the front covers detailing birthday wishes and Christmas love and the occasional “just because I love you,” message.

Ben really doesn’t want to ever touch them again. So maybe having help wouldn’t be too much of a hassle. At least just to get them into the dusty square of a living room.

He’ll clean as he goes, he’s too eager to get this part done with. Get the final step finished and leave all that pain buried in a New Haven cemetery.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

She makes a little noise, her smile gone, "what's got you movin' all the way out here?"

"I needed a change."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, -- he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me" -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

He wanted rural. He wanted quiet. He wanted somewhere with very few people to bother him - and that's exactly what he got.

Ben got a grand total of three people who knew where he lived (excluding Caleb who all but threatened to follow him to Virginia if he didn't at least get his address and his old apartment building who he left his forwarding address to), he got his boxes all stacked in the living room, he got to ignore the traded looks between both people who helped him once they realized just how little he had come with.

They left him a list of shops nearby. The best place to swing in for groceries, best place for the freshest produce. (*"Do not buy any tomatoes, watermelon, radishes, here"* Gilbert counted off on his fingers, with a growing list of other things, *"We grow them to sell, since you live here you get them fresh from the source. If you need a few, only ask. Except the peaches - the trees on your plot are yours to take from as you wish. George has plenty."*)

He poked through the house, tested all the appliances left behind. The generator worked fine, but he made himself a note to call about getting it looked at and went about checking other things. He hooked up the burners on the stove, tested the pipes and the water and the outlets and scribbled down bits that he'd like specifically someone to examine for him.

It took far less time than he would have thought. He glanced to the boxes and duffel bags all stacked and, for one painful moment, envisions himself unpacking.

He doesn't. Instead, he sat on that rotting porch with a pencil and a small notebook in hand. On the edge of the highest point, the place where it looks like it was initially supposed to be at, he starts making a list.

First, he thinks, is all the stuff to clean the place out. The broom wasn't guilty of harboring any bad memories so it leaned against the inside door and Ben had already gone through and swept out all the dust and cobwebs he could.

But some Windex and a few rags wouldn't go amiss. He scribbles it down on his list, meticulously dividing it into subsections of *Places to Go* and *What to Get* and *What to Do*. By the time he finishes, he's got three pages worth and daylight burns down towards the horizon at an unyielding pace.

He locks the door to his new home and starts out.

The closest Ikea is sixty miles away, so Ben makes it a priority and figures he could find a place to get all the cleaning stuff he needs around there. Bringing the bed he and Nate had slept in was impossible - and after he made that decision it was much easier to turn down bringing the couch and the nightstands and the floor lamp he'd bought to set up behind Ben's favorite chair (which is now sitting in a Goodwill somewhere).

He threw all of it into donation piles after the funeral.

Ben's barely into the bulk of the town when his stomach reminds him he'd been too wired to eat before he left, too focused on the road to stop for anything more substantial than a bag of peanuts he picked up with a cheap gas station coffee somewhere in Delaware. And he doesn't actually remember eating it.

Though, he's pretty sure he didn't. He pulls into a little diner, someplace Gilbert had written in on that list, and already the little seedlings of dread nestled in his gut start to sprout.

It's quaint. Worn, cracked vinyl over the booths and scratched table-tops with mis-matched salt and pepper shakers. There's only a few people in it, one guy in head-to-toe camouflage with his arm around a chick with more religious-based tattoo's than bare skin clashing against a group of four women, ranging so vastly in ages from young teens to mid-forties, all quietly whispering to one another in the what could probably be Sunday Best on a Wednesday afternoon.

They giggle a bit, but quiet down once Ben's presence becomes apparent. Eyes slide up to him, all at once, like they were trying to place him.

He slides into a booth fast and ducks his head.

Fuck, maybe he should've just waited and gotten some shit take-out on his way back. But it's too late now to change his mind as a waitress approaches, wielding an off-white mug in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other.

"Hey there, sweet-pea," she greets, with a honey-sweet accent that almost has to be fake and grin as plastic as the menus sticking to the table, "You look like you could use a cup of coffee."

Ben doesn't even get a chance to respond before she sets the mug down and fills it near the brim. It takes all his willpower to not crinkle his nose at the wafting stench of burned roast.

"Thanks," he manages instead, flat and wholly insincere.

Her grin flickers, fades then comes back stronger. "Can I get you anthin' to start with? Or do you need a minute?"

A sort of unnecessarily irate little flare lights under his skin, but of course what would he expect going to a diner other than for people to talk to him? "Just a second or two would be great," he hasn't even flicked open the menu, he isn't even sure when he *got* it.

She hip-swags herself right back over to the church table and the noise kicks back up again from them. Tossing compliments and sweet little jokes back and forth to - to... Ben hadn't even glanced

down at her nametag, had he?

Fuck. He leans forward, elbows on the table while he presses his fingertips to the space between his eyes. Nate was always the charming one, with the sun-lit smile and the big bright eyes - Ben so rarely could match his luster.

And with him gone?

She swings back and he makes a point to check this time. Sally. With a little sticker with a smiley face on the end of it, half-worn away by time. He picks the first thing on the menu and manages some sort of tight-lipped grin.

“Sure thing, sugar,” she says as she plucks the pencil from behind her ear and scrawls it down on her notepad. “You know, we got a lot of regulars from town in here and I don’t think I recall seein’ a face like yours.”

Reminder: stop smiling. Even to be nice. Somewhere out of the sight, one of the church girls gasps and determines someone else worth praying for with the utmost sincerity.

“You just passin’ through?” She asks, the crows feet at her eyes crinkling as she smiles a bit wider.

“Just moved here, actually. I’m living down,” he turns to point, names the street and that church he passes before he turns every time.

She knows it, she definitely does by the sudden twisting of her expressions and her lips into a purse. “You’re not on George Washington’s property, are you?”

“Yep. I moved into that really small house on the back corner this afternoon. Just on my way to Woodbridge to get some stuff for it.” Please don’t ask more questions, he pleads inwardly, please.

She makes a little noise, her smile gone, “what’s got you movin’ all the way out here?”

For a flashing moment, Ben wants to tell her everything. Not because it would make her understand but because it would make her *leave*, and maybe then he could just throw down some cash on table for the coffee and go. Go back to his house, sleep on the floor for all he cares. With the dust and the dirty windows and no Nate beside him to wriggle his ass up to him and huff until Ben wraps his arms around him.

He can imagine how well that would go over, caught between the church family and the camo-couple. *It’s just that I’m really gay and I moved here because my boyfriend, my really super gay boyfriend’s dead and I couldn’t bare living anywhere near the home that we shared anymore. And actually, just the thought of having to see more people in my daily life makes me so sick to my core that I bought a really small house in the middle of nowhere just to avoid this conversation.*

Needless to say, he doesn’t say that.

“I needed a change.”

He pokes at his biscuits until he can justify the amount of time spent staring down into nothing while the world drones around him and the seedlings bloom into a thornbush.

The cash is left on the table and the rest of his drive is silent.

Ben ends up at a Target first, wrangling bottles of cleaner, trash bags, a mop and rags and everything he thinks he might need, plus some more basics just in case. He leaves it all on his

passenger seat, half the bags tied neatly, the other ones rolling their contents across the floor.

He doesn't bother to right them even as he parks in front of the storefront all done up in bright blue and even brighter yellow. He huffs to himself, the frustration that was nipping at his heels since the diner catching up and curling between his ankles.

The truck parked next to him as one of those bright green, rather anatomical dangling sacks and the matching bumper sticker promising everyone who passes by that "My truck has *BALLS!*"

The tackiness of it doesn't exactly serve to help his sour mood.

Neither does the lack of pencils to accompany the little papers to write the numbers on. He ends up on the third stack before he finds one that isn't rubbed down to an absolute nub. And by then he's promptly turned around enough to not quite know where he's going.

The little map against the board doesn't do much for his sense of placement either, a crooked "You are here!" arrow tells him if he goes north through bathrooms he should get to bedroom stuff rather quickly.

He does that and ends up in children's, and then from there kitchens and he makes a note to pick up a trashcan on his way out. But still no *fucking* bedroom sets. All he needs is a bed.

A full. Hell, he doesn't even need a frame - a box spring under it would be good enough to keep it off the floor and make him feel less disgusting than when he had been sleeping on friends couches and a blow up in his living room.

He finds some painfully small futon on his way and writes the number and the name down, triple-checking it before moving on.

There's a heavy ache in his chest that seems to accompany him everywhere now, just a regular throb that times out his days - rising and falling and rising again in uneven and random increments. Sometimes it spends the entire day just a low buzzing of pain - others, like now, it swells without any sign of ever stopping.

Nate's voice is in the back of his head, picking out names of chairs and sofas to turn into puns. So Ben might be going a little crazy. Or really crazy. He tries not to look at the names as he passes, but it's hard when they're so in his face.

Especially when he's checking one to see if he wants it, and then Nate's laughter surges up loud in his ears when he reads the tag and he can practically see him pointing to the name and, with his quick and sharp mind, saying:

"These chairs are pretty cheap. I wonder if that's the price Nolmyra-lly..."

For a second, his eyes burn and he's worried he might just start crying in the middle of an Ikea. With wailing babies being hushed four sections down and couples, old and new, milling about and buying furniture for their first, their second or their *only* place together.

God, has he ever bought furniture alone? He tries to think, but someone was always there - more often than not, it was Nate. Nate had bumped around with him the first time he bought stuff for his first off-campus apartment, Nate had, of course, been there when they picked up stuff for their first *shared* apartment.

Picking out the most garish and useless designs he could just to watch Ben's face when he was trying to pass it off as something they seriously needed.

Humming that stupid, catchy song right in his ear while they walked.

Elbowing Ben into staging full scenes in model kitchens.

Pushing him down onto display beds and kissing him breathless. Again and again until someone crimson-faced kid in blue-collared bright-yellow shirt asked them kindly to please knock it off or leave. And Nate, half-straddling Ben's lap, would flash that stupidly charming smile and apologize and say these beds were *just so damn good-looking, how could he resist?*

He could handle anything for them, he wasn't quite suave he was... he was something else. Something Ben could hardly ever come close to being, something outside of his grasp and outside of his hold...

Ben's sniffing before he can stop himself. Chest rattling on an inhale as he presses the heels of his hands to his eyes. Fuck. Just... fuck. He takes a second to even his breathing as he feels the edges of his resolve start to crack around the rotting center - he just needs a second.

Maybe two and he'll be fine.

Breathe in, and out. In, and out. In and--

"Can I help you find anything, sir?"

Out.

Everything in him flares out all at once and he's got the flash-bang urge to just wheel around and punch the weedy salesman. He doesn't, but he sure does want to. Instead he takes the rest of his second before he lets his hands fall, paper and pencil still caught between his fingers.

"Sir? Do you need--"

"I'm fine. I've... I've got it. Thanks, though."

He speedwalks away, weaving around walls and through subsections. Beds can wait, couches can wait - chairs and furniture, it can *all wait*. He just needs to be out of there, out of whatever den of memories he's waltzed himself into while his vision ends up hazy and his breathing feels sharp.

His emotions live on his face, he already knows this and he knows the way people flicker their eyes to him and then sharply back away again he looks like a mess. He is a mess, he's been a mess for ten months.

A wreck, a ruin, he should have known he wouldn't be able to do it without Nate. He should've been the one who left for coffee that morning and never came back.

Shattering. He's shattering. He needs to leave, he can sleep on the floor or something - but his legs won't seem to take him much farther so instead he just sits on the edge of a nearby display bed and lets his head hang down between his knees.

He tries to justify leaving empty-handed, knowing the best he has is a few blankets in a box to make do. Maybe he could duck his way through the warehouse section for the futon and just have that for a bit?

But the idea of coming back makes him just as sick to the stomach.

Maybe if he stumbles around a bit he could find the bedroom sets, pick out a stand and a bed and a-

-he opens his eyes suddenly.

He's sitting on a bed. He's *in* the bedroom section.

There you go, sunshine, that sweet voice murmurs soft in his mind. *Just get it done. Get it done, go home.*

He picks the first full, stand, and wood-slat frame he sees, with only half a sparing glance at the number or the name before he heads down towards the warehouse, picking up little things he might need if not just to keep his hands and mind busy.

Trashcan, a lamp, a hook for his towel - even a collection of tools he thinks he might need fixing up the porch already packaged on a toolbelt. He works quick, neat and mechanically. Checking out with only a fast glance at the total and an anguished surge of pain at knowing where the money he's using this for is coming from.

Getting it into his truck alone wasn't something he'd thought of until he was there. Grunting against the swelter of the setting sun as he twisted and lifted and shoved up until he finally got it all up into the bed. His arms ached, his head ached.

He just wants to curl up somewhere far, far away from everyone and sleep... just sleep.

The drive feels longer. The sun setting fast down over the horizon and it's a good thing his lights work, he guesses. So he won't be setting up his bed with nothing but his flashlight and his phone.

It's dark when he pulls in, there's a light on in the main room of Washington's place but this time the man's not out on the porch - and Ben's a little relieved, if not just so he isn't forced into another interaction.

He manages to get the bed of his truck as close as he can to his door before he turns it off and slips out. Piling the backs onto one wrist and dangling his keys from the other, he carefully navigates the sloping porch.

There's a folded paper taped to his door and, with a careful moment of deliberation, he ignores it in favor of getting the door open and his shit inside first. The lights struggle on as he sets the bags on the floor, using one to prop the door open so he can get the bigger things inside better.

He snags the paper and unfolds it. There, in slightly looped handwriting, is a note.

Mr. Tallmadge,

I came to introduce myself, but it seems you were not in.

*In any case, if you have any questions or concerns regarding
the property, this is where I can be reached.*

-- G. Washington

He left his phone number in neat and careful print.

There's something in his gut, uncomfortable and heavy and he isn't sure what to do with the note

besides walk through to his kitchen and leave it on his counter.

Maybe he should've picked up magnets.

He struggles with the furniture, contemplates leaving it all out in his truck until he can give in and call Gilbert for a hand, and then finally gets all the shit inside. The tiny space looks claustrophobic now, nothing but boxes and boxes and bags.

Ben ends up hauling the pieces of the bedframe up the ladder piece by piece to assemble in the loft. By the time he's finished methodically following each direction, the alarm clock that sits plugged in on his floor threatens 11:45 and he's exhausted.

He drops the mattress four times trying to get it up into the loft.

It takes him standing on a box and stepping onto a chair to shove it. He falls asleep face-down, fully clothed.

Chapter End Notes

It can only get worse before it can get better.

Fun Facts:

- In this, Washington's property is in Orange County, VA. For directional and distance purposes I've been using the address for a church.
- The song Nate hummed to Ben a lot was [Ikea](#) by Johnathan Coulton
- Historically, George Washington had a crush on a girl named Sally Fairfax and she totally rejected his ass.
- That chair exists. It's on sale (which means that's not actually it's price Nolmyra'lly!)

You know the drill: Ask me things on [Tumblr](#)

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

For the first time in a long time, Ben gets a good look at himself in the mirror.

Chapter Notes

This chapter got to about 5k when I realized it should be split into two separate chapters. So enjoy two longer-than-average chapters

Also please check updated tags for content warnings (blood and accidental injury)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“A chief event of life is the day in which we have encountered a mind that startled us.” -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

It isn't the sunlight streaming in from the windows or the blaring of an alarm that wakes Ben, but the restless wiggling of the body in his arms. He shifts and yawns against the neck his face was buried in, but doesn't open his eyes, not yet. Maybe if he ignores it, he can grab just a few more minutes of sleep; but the insistence of the movement and the huffs of frustration refuse to let him even try.

He groans once, long and low and not because the man he's got his arms wrapped around is writhing itself in any productive manner. He tries to lift his arm, if that's what's keeping him in place, but instead he just rolls over to face Ben. He doesn't know how he knows. His eyes are closed but it's like the scene plays from another part of him, etched in his memory as much as it is his reality

“Morning, sunshine,” the voice is so familiar, so warm and welcoming and yet, Ben's filled with a sudden desperation for something that he can't place and a raw fear of something he doesn't know. “It's about time, I've been awake forever.”

“Maybe you should've gotten up then,” he says, the words feeling natural and robotic all at once and his boyfriend wriggles himself on top of him and nudges Ben to roll over onto his back, thoroughly tangling the soft sheets around their bodies. Bare skin touches his, warm against the cooling air, and he finally opens his eyes.

Nate smiles down at him, and something in Ben breaks and floods him with dread.

“I wanted you to wake up first, babe,” he says before leaning in and stealing a gentle, sweet kiss. “Come on, it's Saturday, we don't have the minds of future leaders to mold into jack shit today --

so I was thinking..."

Another kiss comes to land on his collar and Ben's hands move instinctively to Nate's side, chasing the fear in his gut away just by the heat of his skin under his palms. Smooth, soft, so familiar.

So alive. (He doesn't want to know why he's thinking that. He just wants to relax, let the pain unwind)

He tilts his head back and lets Nate cover him with warm, slow touches and loving kisses.

"What were you thinking?" He asks around a gasp when Nate's teeth catch just under his morning stubble. His boyfriend chuckles there and releases.

Sitting back, Nate moves to straddle Ben's lap, their sheets twisted around him almost artistically. Draping around his lean thighs and narrow hips. His short hair is mussed from sleep and he's got that grin that made Ben fall in love with him curling across his lips.

Ben's never seen a sight so gorgeous in his life.

"Go on," he says, smirking up at him, "I'll wait." He thumbs along under Nate's ribs. He's not a ticklish guy but the light touch makes him squirm in *just* the right place to make Ben's eyelids flutter.

"I was thinking," Nate sighs as he twists his hips perfectly intentionally, "that you could make up for being too busy grading to fuck me last night."

"Oh?" Okay, Ben's totally awake now. That echo of dread lingering at the back of his tongue. "And how could I make that up to you?"

"You could, maybe..." Nate's hand drags down Ben's chest - leaving little shockwaves of need in the wake of his blunted nails - to rest right below his navel. "Go to that cafe on Orange Street and get me a turtle latte?"

And Ben's hand's drop down to his face and he flops his head back with a groan. Of course. Nate doesn't seem at all perturbed by this, and instead shifts down Ben's body to nuzzle up under his jaw and plead.

"Come on, then when you get back we can put all that caffeine to good use and have the same messy marathon sex we had when we first got together," he whines, and that offer is tempting, "the Chai you get won't be the only thing dirty."

"It's like a 25 minute drive," Ben groans from under his hands. His heart's racing and he doesn't know why. Nate whines again, this time flopping his full body-weight onto Ben's chest with a hard *oomf* being forced up from his lungs.

He cracks, crumbles and gives in, wrapping his arms around him. "How about we stay in, I make you a cup of coffee with way too much sugar here and then we can have all the messy marathon sex we want?"

Nate tries to wriggle free and something's different. The room feels hotter, his arms feel heavier and he can't quite think of why - but he just knows Nate *can't go*, "I'll just go myself. It's fine."

No. This is wrong. This is wrong and different something's going to happen. Ben knows this, he doesn't know how but he knows. *You can't, you can't... please. I'll go instead - I'll go*, he wants

to scream it, but invisible chains link his body to the bed and he can't get up, he can't move.

No, no, this isn't happening. Ben tries to hold tighter. *Nate, don't go*, he opens his mouth but no words come, his heart is in his throat and he can't breathe.

Nate gets up off the bed, Ben can't push himself up, he wants to yell at him not to go, not to go, not to go but his voice won't come. *Please*, he tries to scream, *don't go, don't go don't--*

You won't come back.

###

Ben's pillow is damp when he wakes up.

Across the room, on the floor, his alarm clock clicks over to 4:22 am. *That wasn't even how it happened*, is his first thought.

He was supposed to go with him. Ply him with kisses until they finally agreed to get breakfast at the little cafe they loved so much, but another teacher called Ben and Nate had pressed himself against his back and leaned up to kiss the shell of his ear and told him it was fine.

He could handle himself picking Ben up a fruit and nut wrap and a dirty Chai all on his own. Like a big boy, he had taunted while Ben tried to hush him and tell him to just give him five minutes and he'll join him.

But Nate was already out the door.

Sitting up, Ben scrubs his eyes with his hands. The tears are still hot and slick against his cheeks and he tries to steady himself. He'd been having variations of the same nightmare since it happened - each one starting when they woke up and ending with Nate leaving and Ben begging him not to.

Like if he wished hard enough he could change the past and stop Nate from leaving.

Every night, he tries something else to beg Nate to stay. Every night it doesn't work.

Still dressed in his clothes from the day before, he stumbles out off his bed. The night isn't any better than the day - the musty air had cleared out through the open windows but it was still just as humid as it was disgustingly hot.

He makes his way down the ladder on mechanical movements, out to his car, to his glove compartment where he knows he left his phone. He navigates his porch and the dirt patch that serves as his driveway barefoot with ease and isn't even paying enough attention to know if he shut the door behind himself when he made it back inside.

He doesn't, however, make it up the ladder. Instead he slumps, against a pile of boxes topped with a plastic bag, and waits for it to boot up. It flashes the brand logo twice and buzzes three times in his hand.

And then many, many more.

Notifications roll in as it turns it back down onto absolutely silent and he ignores every single one. Texts. Missed Calls. Voicemails. Emails. Everything.

He scrolls through his messaging log down, eight conversations down.

Last message: September 22nd, 2015

8:22 [to Nate]: it was just Sampson trying to navigate the new grading system >:[

8:22 [from Nate]: booo tell him to check the email about it, it was district wide

8:23 [to Nate]: don't text me while youre driving

8:23 [to Nate]: unless you're already there

8:26 [from Nate]: yeah i am

8:26 [from Nate]: just picked up our order im omw back

8:31 [to Nate]: drive safe, love you <4

8:31 [to Nate]: *<3

8:32 [from Nate]: always do, love you too sunshine

8:33 [from Nate]: <4

9:06 [to Nate]: baaaaaaaaabe your side of the beds cold come back

9:10 [to Nate]: i might die of hunger

9:10 [to Nate]: or lack of dirty chai's

9:37 [to Nate]: okay, now im getting worried. call me or something?

10:02 [to Nate]: seriously nathan where are you??

He had his phone backed up to his computer, then the backup saved on a flashdrive just in case. He'd stopped texting after that and just called him instead. Voice mails, more calls, hell - he even called the cafe just in case Nate was still there for some reason.

He wasn't. He had left when he said he would. Some asshole with somewhere to be ran his stop sign. Nate was gone.

Just like that.

Tucking his knees up to his chin, Ben scrolls to the top of the conversation and starts again.

And once he reaches the bottom, he does it again. Until the sun crests over the horizon and he's all out of tears.

###

Ben plugs his phone on to charge without responding or reading any of the messages left for him. He'd uninstalled all his other communication apps for that purpose exactly, but you couldn't exactly purge texting and phone calls off an object made for exactly that purpose.

A flash of the first few words as a preview tells him all the things he needs to know anyway.

Caleb: answer your godd...

Abe: if you need to t...

Anna: call me.

He leaves it face-down on the floor, fishes out some clothes from his duffel and drags the bag full of shampoo, conditioner, soap and all that stuff into his bathroom.

Next to the sink is a small little three-tiered shelf. Nailed up into the wall high enough that Ben doesn't have to crouch to reach his stuff. He only needs the topmost level anyway. Razor, deodorant, shaving cream, comb, his contacts and solution. He set his toothbrush and the little travel-sized toothpaste on the side of the sink.

It only looks a little pathetic.

He showers fast, no reason to linger under the lukewarm spray, and grabs his towel from where he'd tossed it over the top of the door.

For the first time in a long while, once he steps out of the shower at enough of a distance away, he gets a good look at himself in the mirror. Dripping onto the tiled floor (he really should get a mat so he doesn't slip) with his towel still rubbing dry his hair - he gets a full view of himself from head to thigh.

And it isn't pretty. He looks awful, the once decently-defined muscle of his arms and abdomen is gone. Replaced instead with just a pale, thin stretch of flesh over his ribs and down to his legs. He used to run, before school every morning, and swim with Nate and go to the gym twice a week - he stopped when he died.

It shows. Even his fingers look thinner where he turns to drag them along his side. He doesn't have to push hard to feel his ribs or the sharpness of his hipbone. Jesus, he thinks to himself, he looks sick. Hair too long and too flat.

The dark bags match his dull eyes and stand out stark against his colorless face. Maybe not even sick - more like a corpse. Lifeless. He hand-combs his hair back and dries himself down quickly.

He could always go and cover it in all black. That would probably work.

The towel gets hung back up to dry and he ignores the mirror and starts to get ready for a day's work. He combs his hair for real, ties it back in a bun and rolls on enough deodorant that he feels like he won't reek for the rest of the day's worth of being out in that relentless, sticky heat.

Dressing in whatever he picked at random (dark gray cargo shorts that used to fit kinda tight and now he's half worried they might just fall down around his ankles and a maroon t-shirt), he contemplates shaving his two-day stubble (and doesn't), brushes his teeth and gives in to look again.

No less miserable than before.

He unpacks his coffee pot first.

Then, he makes quick work of the rest. Dishes, silverware, pots and pans. The trash can goes under the sink and his clothes all get tossed - in the bag still - into the closet.

He's already opened the rest of the windows in just a few short hours, but the edges of the dream still haunt him. Begging Nate not to go - pleading with him with every ounce of desperation.

If he'd gone, they would have stayed for hours in the cafe.

If he'd ignored the phone call, he never would have been back on that road.

If he'd done something, anything, Nate would still be alive.

He's told himself that every day for ten months.

His hands shake when he opens the next box. Books. There was a shelf left behind just before the closet door - big enough for all his books and a few other things he might want to store. He doesn't organize them when he puts them up.

Ben doesn't break down the boxes but leaves them outside to deal with later - he'd gotten instructions on trash removal from Gilbert as well as recycling, but he figures he can use them later when he figures he could fix up the porch.

Or just tear it all down.

With the boxes cleared, the place looks a little better already. Ben puts a pot of coffee on to brew. It doesn't help the buzzing in the back of his head.

Please, don't go.

You won't come back.

Neither does the second cup.

All he has to do for the futon is screw the legs on and somehow he manages to fuck that up and make it wobble - one of the boxes sacrifices itself to steady the other three legs onto the one that's just too long.

The box holding the pieces of the side table goes up onto the loft to deal with later and, with the rest of everything cleared out, it looks a little better. He even hung up the pictures Anna had given him, set the vases beside the fireplace.

A little better, a little less like a mess.

A little more like a place he'll be living in. Some strange numb parody of a home, without all the warmth it's supposed to provide.

Ben fetches himself his third cup of coffee already - he isn't exactly used to this much caffeine but the lack of sleep from the last two days is catching up quickly and he still has so much left to do. He'd had his coffee in the morning at school and a travel mug full of tea in the middle of the day - and on the weekends it varied depending on what Nate wanted to do.

He didn't need the energy afterwards, it all went to waste lying on the couch and staring at the ceiling and not even bothering to pretend like he could feel anything but the constant dull thud in his chest.

So three cups tended to make his hands shake just a bit more than he would've liked. An uncomfortable buzzing in the back of his mind that, for once, wasn't just Nate.

And, well, it was unpleasant but not unwelcome.

The trembling didn't subside and neither did the constant hum of thoughts that rattled along their little hamster wheel at dangerously high speeds. So he opens another box, this one he left atop of the pull-down table so he wouldn't have to kneel or bend as much.

It's smaller than the rest and taped shut delicately and Ben knows he folded down the tops of all of his boxes. He uses his keys to drag it open, brow pinching. Maybe this was the first one he packed? Or the last?

But he doesn't remember packing it at all. He starts unloading the contents with one hand, tightly clinging to a half-filled mug with the other, and it dawns on him slowly that he *didn't* pack this box. It was all things he specifically didn't want to bring.

It wasn't anything useful, in fact, Ben strictly remembers putting that little chanchito (sitting content there as soon as he opens the box) in a plastic tub bound for the storage center he moved all of his and Nate's other things to. He'd dropped the little good luck pig in and Anna had huffed at him.

Said he'd miss all this shit when he was gone.

Anna.

Ben sees red and his knuckles go white against the mug's blue handle. Anna was there when he was putting this all away, when he was tucking it out of his life to never be seen again - because he didn't *want* to ever see it again. Anna was the only one there - she was supposed to be helping him clear out Nate's desk and their shelves full of tacky, kitschy gifts that they traded all the goddamn time.

She must've snuck them into the box when he was busy, must've moved it all towards what he was going to keep.

He's tempted to just shut the box, go out back and set the whole fucking thing on fire. Or bury it.

Or push it in the lake.

But there's a sudden stab of pain at the idea of watching it go to cinders or cover in dirt or disappear into the waves... so he sets the pig down and picks up the next thing.

It's one of those crappy plastic molds, all done in one color, that they'd gotten for a buck-fifty at a zoo one day. An all-green tiger with a weird hole in the bottom of it's paw that looked half-burned out. It stands crooked next to the pig and is soon joined by a little Mountie from their trip to Canada, a shot glass from Iowa that proudly proclaims *Smell All Seven*, and Nate couldn't stop wheezing laughing at the gas station they saw it in.

They were all cushioned gently on a huge bag of magnets. It looked like all the ones from Ben's fridge, actually. Gifts from Caleb from the countries he'd docked in when he was sailing around the world, things they picked up from every state, national park, zoo, event, whatever Nate and Ben visited - together or not.

There was a tiny little souvenir from it stuck to their fridge.

He smiles as he picks it up, sadly, to himself and looks down at what was carefully concealed beneath it.

The mug shatters as hits the ground.

Coffee splashes up against his boots, a disgusting, agonizing sensation fills his gut fresh and hot and he hates in the moment it takes for the cup to slip from his grasp and impact with a dull, muted crash.

He hates everything - so raw and so hard that it overwhelms the core of his entire existence into nothing but a ball of blinding, seething *rage*.

Ben didn't ask for this, Ben didn't *want* this - he never wanted this. He never wanted any of this and now, sitting there at the bottom of the box, staring up at him like a pathetic joke, is a picture.

Not just any plain picture of Nate and Ben, God knows they had plenty of those, but the one that had stood on their dresser, the one that everyone coo'd and awe'd over on Facebook and Nate's Twitter.

It was the morning they moved into their apartment together. Anna steadying her camera, Caleb urging them closer, closer, *come on, get closer for fuck's sake. Look cute*.

Ben had taken a chance and swooped in right at the perfect moment. One arm locked around Nate's waist - both of them grinning too much to be kissing even with their mouths pressed together. One of Nate's hands grips hard at his back as Ben tips him back a little too far.

It was a good thing Anna caught it when she did, because they both fell right after.

Something hits the picture frame. Landing just under Nate's grinning face. Ben sniffs as he looks up and then back down. Scrubbing at the rest of his angry tears, he leaves the photo in the box and shoves everything else down on top of it and seals the damn thing up again.

Then he opens it and slams the fucking pig down as he claws down under everything for the picture.

He leaves it laying on the table and, going to step away, remembers the ruined mug.

It takes all of two seconds for it to happen. For Ben to kneel away from the spreading puddle and steady himself on his right hand to pick up the pieces.

All it takes is for him to set his hand down in just the wrong place for a real, shallowly physical pain to erupt hot through his hand and down fast his arm. He lifts it quick back up, sitting on his heels as he cradles it to his chest, but the damage has been done.

Right where his hand was, a nice, shiny piece of glass he must've missed gleams back up at him.

"Fuck," he hisses between clenched teeth as his heartbeat re-directs itself to the center of his palm. He clenches it hard and presses it against his shirt but but blood's already started to seep down his arm in long, dark, fat droplets. He doesn't need this, he doesn't fuckin *need* this right now.

Wincing and keeping his head from going dizzy, he pries his fingers away from the wound one by one. Blood rushes hot over his skin, slipping down to mix with the coffee staining his floor. He only needs to look for a second before his headrush is back and he feels sick.

When was the last time he ate, actually ate and didn't just pick around at his food? Ugh, he can't

even think about it, or how his legs shake as he pulls himself up by his left hand.

It's gonna need stitches. Or at least to be cleaned.

Okay, okay, he tells himself, don't panic.

He's not going to panic, he's going to get in his car and go down to the nearest clinic. He glances down at his hand, the right one curled tight at his chest, flexing and relaxing and flexing again in pain. Can he even drive his stick-shift like this?

Maybe? He grabs one of the dish towels he had bought the night before and presses it to the wound firmly and manages to wrangle his keys from his pocket as he leaves.

Okay. One breath in. Exhale.

He doesn't bother locking his door.

Ben gets himself hauled up into his truck before he stops to examine the wound again. The first wave of blood is drying against his arm, and he knows it's probably far less worse than it looks, but it still seems deep.

And the last thing he needs is for it to get infected. So he makes an attempt to tie the now-ruined hand towel around his palm - but his other hand's shaking too damn much and it's hard enough securing a knot with one hand. He tucks the fabric into itself a few times and ends up reaching over himself to change gears when he realizes using that hand isn't quite an option.

So he crosses his good hand over his chest with a bit of a struggle.

He's at the turn when he realizes he has no idea where he's going. He stops to think, idling there for a moment.

He couldn't even think of *passing* a clinic on his way in, or Gilbert mentioning one or -- fuck he could call Gilbert, couldn't he? Yes! He reaches for his pocket and realizes his phone is still back at his house. Charging. Because he'd spent all night reading through that last conversation.

God, how can he be so stupid? It's like he fucks up everything he touches magnificently and without any actual effort - he dropped the fucking mug, he sliced his goddamn hand open, and hell, he couldn't even make it through an hour in a *furniture* store without having some sort of complete and total *breakdown*.

And here it comes.

He can feel his throat start to constrict, one hand clenching tight at the wheel and the other lying useless in his lap. All Ben can manage is a wrecked, shattered breath in before angry tears well up once again.

Once again, he has no one to direct this rage at so he turns it inward - this is all his fault anyway. He could twist and turn it around to blame everyone else but it's *his fault*, it always has been and it always will be. He shouldn't have even moved out here, he was too stubborn, too stupid, too angry to make a good decision. Like always and now he's stuck, stuck here where he doesn't know where the goddamn clinic is so he can bleed out in a pick-up truck dented and scraped with other people's stories.

Somewhere in the edges of his blurry vision, something shifts and he remembers exactly where he is.

Idling half-way between the road out onto the main street, and his landlords living room window.

Ben moves on autopilot, scrubbing at his eyes with one hand until he's thoroughly convinced he can look like maybe he wasn't just a quarter inch away from downright balling in his car. It takes him twice to get the door unlocked, shaking so goddamn hard, but once he does, and stumbles himself back down into the solid ground, it's just easier to follow the short path to the porch. Up those three little steps and right to his door.

He doesn't think of the man leaning against the post he saw just the other day, the way his watchful eyes never seemed to stop tracking Ben -- or strange way that waitress had shifted when he said he was living on Washington's property, or the way Gilbert and his wife avoided talking about him at seemingly all costs.

All Ben can think of is that moment their eyes met and the eerie sort of chill that overcame him.

He knocks with his good hand.

Chapter End Notes

Some Fun Facts:

- In this AU both Ben and Nate were teachers. Ben taught 10th grade US History and Senior Government. Nate was a first grade teacher. He loved shaking glitter out of his hair onto Ben when he got home.
- Nate here is supposed to look like Matt Doyle because it's Really Convenient.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Ben finally meets his neighbor.

Chapter Notes

Since Chapters 3 and 4 were originally only supposed to be one chapter, there's no opening quote but instead a small recap of what you read 4 days ago (or four seconds ago depending on your binge-reading preferences).

Continued warning for blood and accidental injury.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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###

The first thing that hits him is barking. Sharp and hard and *loud*. Sudden enough to make him jump back from the door as he whips his head around to check for some sort of posted sign.

When he finds nothing, his heart thuds faster. Of course. The barking doesn't stop and Ben tenses, anticipating some hulking Rottweiler to burst through the door at any second or a German Shepherd or some other massive animal tearing through to bowl him over and put him out of his misery.

Instead, a Chocolate Lab rounds the corner at full speed. The dog ignores the steps and leaps onto the porch to get at Ben faster, skidding to a halt right at his feet.

His heart's still somewhere up in his throat as it barks again right up at him and snuffles from boot to waist to boot to waist again and proclaims... something with another, excited bark. Ears just a little too big for it's head and tongue lolling out the side of its mouth, looking like a massive grin,

Ben assumes it's some sort of approval and offers up his unwounded hand.

He's rewarded immediately with slobber.

He's pretty sure this dog didn't even *sniff* his hand before it went immediately to lick the entire thing then promptly shove its furry head right into it.

It wags its tail into just an arcing brown blur and waits patiently for a quarter of a second before deciding that Ben isn't getting the message fast enough and barks, nice and loud so Ben can hear.

"Hey," He says, weak and quiet as he manages one gentle pet down the top of its head before he's startled back once again.

A sharp whistle cuts through the easing tension and builds it right back up again and Ben recoils hard from the dog who doesn't even seem to register the noise except to sit down and keep his eyes completely trained on Ben with that same lolling dog-grin.

It does glance once, to the door then back to Ben, happy to pant and wait there.

The door edges open, slowly and almost tentative, and the figure from the porch just the other day fills the entryway. He was definitely bigger up close. Looming what had to be at least four, maybe five inches above the top of Ben's head and way more solid than he'd previously expected.

"Mopsey," He says in a voice that's more age-worn and hardened than anyone saying the word '*mopsey*' has the right to have, "leave him alone." The dog shifts its paws and whimpers once, but otherwise does not listen.

"Mr. Washington?" Because a confirmation would always be nice before he went and made another stupid mistake. It's definitely those same eyes from before that flicker over to him. Cold, incredibly sharp and pointed straight through him like he could tell... like he knows. Ben feels uncomfortably exposed for a hot, searing second under the scrutiny of those eyes -- but then his expressions shifts and there's something else. It's not quite pity in his eyes but a distant pain.

And then what looks like worry, and Ben's only confused for half a second before he remembers his bloodshot eyes, the dark bags under them, the way he can feel his hair coming loose from its bun and the blood. On his arm, his shirt, staining the towel wrapped around his hand.

He opens the door wider and steps back. Mopsey, as Ben assumes the dog's name to be, takes this as reason enough to make its way inside - looking back as if to ask if Ben was coming too.

"George," the man breaks the silence with a knifelike point. "I prefer to be called George, if you would. Come inside, I'll take a look at your hand."

"Oh, you don't - I wanted to know if you knew where the closest clinic is? Or maybe if you could give me a ride, you really don't have to -- I think it needs stitches." Ben stammers, but George's steady demeanor is relaxing.

"I've handled enough injuries to know for certain if it will. If you wish, I can call for Gilbert to take you into town but I don't think it'll be necessary."

Ben's agreeing before he even knows it.

The inside of the farmhouse is refreshingly cool, and it takes him a second to adjust from the brightness of the outside to the gentle dim of the living room. "Make yourself at home," George says, brushing past into another room quickly and Ben spares a glance around.

He'd expected... well... he didn't know what he expected. Maybe more stuffed and taxidermied animals hanging around. Mounted deer heads and rifles and shotguns hanging off the mantle? Pictures of men on the dock of lakes holding up massive fish? Camo?

Instead he's met with a rustic sort of homey. There's a couch that looks older than he is, big and well-used sitting in the middle of the room - its sole occupant being a now curled up lump of brown fur. What looks (and feels) like a hand-knit blanket is draped over the back. All the pictures that line the walls and dot the room seem to be of other people - a few of Gilbert and Adrienne (including one which appears to be from their wedding), a few of what looks like a startlingly young Gilbert alone or with another, angrier-looking, young man.

The only pictures of George he can make out from where he decides to perch himself on the end of the couch, are with a woman. Beautiful, from the photos, with a warm grin leaning against a very much younger looking George in front of the farm house (unpainted, in the photo).

He leans in a little to look up the framed pictures, not getting up but wishing he had put in his contacts to see better. She appears rather often, looking as young as maybe eighteen in some of them and as old as maybe mid-thirties in others, George just as much. Then they all seem to stop.

Nothing past what looks like a few years ago, Gilbert, Adrienne, that other guy and some other woman.

None of her, none of George. Then his gaze is drawn back to the mantle above the fireplace - there's only one photo up, the woman who frequented the photos standing on a stack of two apple boxes, elegant in heels and a white dress that stops just above her ankle. A lacy train fluffs up and back out of frame, and she's got her arms wrapped around George's neck while he steadies his hands on her waist.

Her dress, his suit - that wide, bright smile that matches the both of them so well...

It all strikes Ben at once what he's staring at and he quickly looks away, fixating back on his hands with that sick feeling and heart aching that he felt before. Beside him, Mopsey unfurls himself and stretches long enough to plop his head on Ben's leg and start to whine.

He's content there when Ben scratches behind his ear gently.

There's only a few moments for Ben to ponder as he looks around before George comes back out, as silent as ever, holding a scratched and chipped box in his hands. There's no big red cross on it, but Ben's already got a fair idea what it could be as George pauses to look at him, Ben brings his hand back away from the dog.

Mopsey whines and licks his elbow.

"The sink, if you would, Mr. Tallmadge." He doesn't say anything as he strides past with shockingly light steps. Ben scurries to follow. He waits until George is done fiddling with the taps in the cozy, spacious kitchen to remove the dish towel around his hand - but George stops him.

"Let me," he offers, rough voice quiet as he offers his own hand. Ben lets him, realizing belatedly that he's still shaking.

His hand fits well, he notices, back of his hand cradled in George's palm as the man carefully peels away the towel. Ben almost winces when it pulls where it was stuck with dried blood but George is so gentle and quick it hardly stings. Admittedly, he hadn't expected it - but George guided his hand under the water to wash away the clinging flecks with such a careful touch.

He's stopped trembling, finally, with his hand wrapped in George's two, his thumbs just skimming the skin of his hand.

"Ben's fine," he says, belatedly and George looks almost startled by the suddenness with which he spoke. But only for a moment before Ben clarifies, "I mean... you don't have to call me Mr. Tallmadge. Actually, I'd prefer it if you didn't. Just Ben is fine."

Then George's expression settles back to the same carefully blank slate - his brows pinched together just a fraction more this time.

Though, Ben isn't sure why he's scrutinizing George's face so much. Or the line of his arm, down to where his elbows rest on the countertop as he hunches down to get closer. Or why instead of being tense and upset and still so goddamn angry, he's calmed down considerably.

It's the adrenaline, he justifies to himself, it's wearing off. It has to be.

With the wound cleared, George pulls his hand out from the water and pats it dry with another towel and Ben starts to protest, but he's hushed immediately. "It's fine," George assures, voice subdued.

Still, Ben considers replacing the towels but they look threadbare and he's pretty sure that might be overstepping. Everything in the house looked well-worn and well-loved, not a single new-looking appliance in sight.

It's content, warm.

"It doesn't look like you'll need stitches."

This time Ben jumps as the comfortable silence they'd dwelled in shatters, he almost recoils back but George's grip around his hand tightens just enough to keep him from slipping anywhere. It relaxes almost immediately and Ben refuses to let himself tense.

Nate rushes into the forefront of his mind again.

Washing and bandaging Ben's knuckles whenever he lost his temper at a club or a bar and got a good swing or two in. Nate always had soft, small hands - always that same furrow of concern set between his brows as he gave Ben another speech about how he *doesn't have to get up on every guy who says something crude*.

Ben never got around to telling him it was only to keep them from hurting Nate, with their slurs or comments or anything.

George uses one hand to hold firm while he cleans the cut out better, accurately predicting that Ben would hiss and try to pull his hand away again. He keeps it as a point of pride that he only whimpers once, and nothing registers in George's expression to show that he heard it anyway. George wraps the wound cleanly, rolled gauze and just a rough but quiet, "Tell me if it's too tight."

Ben shifts once his hand is released, a confused sort of desperation buzzing in his gut and he wants to flee - or stay. He can't decide. His gut is telling him to stay, to open his mouth and ask about the land, ask something to continue the ruse of a conversation - to be polite. That's what people did out here, right?

But his chest aches too much, tired and pained.

George takes out a few more things of bandaging and a small tube of antibiotic ointment and holds

it out, "A first aid kit tends not to be the first thing people consider having. You'll need to replace that." He nods to his hand and Ben moves on autopilot - all stiff and mechanical.

He takes the stuff, manages a quiet, sincere, *thank you* to him.

Ben's feet feel like lead when he leaves.

He gets both himself and his car back just fine, exhaustion lingering at his heels.

There's no way with the thick bandaging around his hand that Ben can get back to any sort of real work - so he manages to (carefully, this time) clean up the shattered glass, scrub at the sticky mess of his coffee and sweep the rest of the bitty shards away.

He even feels hungry enough to start to wrangle an early dinner from his freezer. It's a step in the right direction, at least.

Ben hadn't noticed how late it must have been when he injured himself. Or maybe it had taken him a lot longer to get patched up at George's than he thought. The sun's starting to set outside, but he's too tired to even consider staying up much later.

He knows he'll be up early, but that means getting more done. And, he figures, it won't be like he'll be running out of things to do, moving as slow as he will with his injured hand. Lafayette (*Gilbert* , he has to remind himself again) had warned him the previous owner might've left some stuff under the porch - that he hadn't gotten around to clearing it out yet.

That would be easy enough, he figures as he glances around. So far unpacking had been a relative nightmare, far worse than he would've figured it to be, and he opts to put that off just a little bit longer as he quickly checks through all of the boxes left to make sure nothing else was an emotional time bomb waiting in the shadows.

It looks like that was the only one Anna left; if the thought of having to hear ranting about his leave (and, in return, field all of the angry voicemails and texts from Caleb about how Ben responded to *her* and not *him*) didn't make him genuinely sick, he would call just to ask why. Why she thought it was appropriate, why she thought it was a good idea.

Just why.

The timer he set buzzes just as he meanders towards the box lying open and half-unpacked. The folded down table comes down just to the top of the futons back and crowds into a majority of the living space but he doesn't want to touch the box to take it down.

There were more things under that picture.

But that ill feeling returns deep in his gut at the idea of what could be in there. More pictures, more memories that Ben has been trying to forget.

He struggles with his non-dominant hand a bit, just figuring his way around trying to alternate hands enough to free his cheap frozen dinner from its plastic wrapping without causing himself too much more unreasonable anguish.

There's a particular feeling lurking in his gut as he curls up as best on the edge of the futon that isn't covered over by the table and the little good luck pig stares back at him from his spot just beside the box. Nate's voice is back again, whispering right behind his ear, telling him to eat because it's stupid not to.

The sensation only grows. Churning over and over again, tasting so fresh like guilt and sticking to his teeth.

Chapter End Notes

- George Washington actually had a hound named Mopsey.
- He actually spoke to Ben and it only took us 10k words.
- FHIR!George is about 6'4", Martha was 5 feet even. Hence the boxes.

Ask me about Mopsey headcanons at [tumblr](#)
Please.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“A single rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts.” -- Henry David Thoreau.

The box is out the next day, both in terms of placement and its place on the list of Shit Ben Can Put Up With Doing Today.

But so is the rest of his unpacking.

He was feeling...not great but not nearly as terrible as he had been the previous two days. It's a step up, especially given that he'd woken up feeling particularly ill at the echoes of another nightmare. Guilty, again, but he always tends to carry that weight with him. There's something buried under that feeling, but Ben really isn't interested in pulling up the roots to check.

So instead, Ben puts himself to work. He'd wrapped his hand tight and with far less finesse than George had, mirrored a very similar outfit from the last day, and went on to work. He drags out an empty box, ready to fill it with debris then take it away as he decides the most efficient thing to do would be to clear the front end of his rented property first.

Ben rakes, works up a sweat in the stiflingly late-July heat, and contemplates just stripping off his shirt all together when it starts to stick to his skin. He ends up ditching the plaid over-shirt but keeps the dark tee on. Better safe than sorry, he thinks.

He turns on the radio in his truck.

It's a better day. They'd told him he'd have good days, they told him he'd have bad days. This was somewhere in between - when his mind could focus on just one task and a time and not wander too far and he could just feel blissfully nothing besides the deep-building ache in his muscles from a days and the prickle of sun against his skin.

There wasn't much to remember from his dreams, not enough to linger on. There wasn't anything he needed but a throb in his hand to ground him. He clears branches and sticks and piles of leaves up from the front of his place all around to the edges of the peach trees that line just the edge. Feeling impulsive, Ben takes one.

Well, Gilbert said he could take all he wanted from those trees in particular. So the guilt isn't as rippling in his gut at the thought. It's sweet and Ben makes a note to go back and get some more once he's finished with his clean sweep. Fresh fruit would be a good thing to have, he thinks. He didn't pick much up on his sparse shopping trip -- and someone might have mentioned a cherry tree or two being in that area as well? It was the benefits of living on a farm run by pretty generous-seeming people.

Forming a mental list, Ben rubs the dirt and peach juice onto his pants. The sun's hanging high - merciless against another day of clear skies - by the time he circles back and does another sweep through the front and back of his house.

It looks a whole lot tidier by the time he's done. His whole body is abuzz with a little twist of

satisfaction. He rubs his hand together, ducks inside for a water, contemplates changing his bandages and re-assesses what he has left to do today.

The porch.

It must've been the fifteenth time he's thought about it, and he doesn't know much about fixing up porches but he at least knows something about cleaning. He pulls up another box - having filled the first one full of leaves and twigs and a fair amount of just blown-about trash - right to the edge of the porch.

Just some crap, he thinks as he squats down and peers into the darkness. It sends a little shiver of disgust up through his spine. Maybe he should've invested in gloves. He shoots a look back down towards his bandaged hand. Really. It would've been a good idea.

But he didn't.

There's a few gaps toward the sides of the porch, only some of them clearly meant to be there and others just rotted away and Ben figures half of what he's pulling out is going to be just hunks of gross, splintered wood. Well. Better now than never, armed with a flashlight, and some soft top 40's droning out from his radio still and the sun still bright above him and his body feeling a little lighter.

The first spider he encounters almost make him change his mind. Almost.

But he swats it gently away and braves forward. Most of what he pulls out is exactly what he expected -- wood and debris. He pushes it all out towards the rays of light behind him, wiggling farther with each sweeping scoop. Ben's fingers close around something cool and smooth and he almost startles back before he steadies the flashlight to see it's just an old shovel.

Paired with it, a few rusted gardening tools. Ben examines one of them. Three-pronged thing that he couldn't even think to name - all rusted and gross. He makes a face and pushes it back carefully. No need to end up with tetanus.

Ben's just about to start backing himself out to go at the other side when something else cuts above the muffled din of pop music. Closer than his car, a steady patting followed quickly by a heavy, panting sounding and, very suddenly, something *cold* and *wet* presses against his side - up under his shirt.

There's a bang when his head hits the wood above him, flinching instinctively away from whatever just decided to invade his personal space. It then proceeds to press its warm, wiggly body right up against Ben's and kick itself right up into his face, and lick it. Repeatedly.

There's no defense against the onslaught, the angle's too hard to free a hand to hold the beast at bay. So instead, Ben just tries, in vain, to lean and at least keep his mouth out of the line of attack.

"Mopsey," he manages between long, excited laps across his cheek and jaw, "Mops, calm down hold on. Jesus - wait, Mopsey. I'm happy to see you too just. Hold on. No, *down boy* ." But the dog doesn't listen, the proximity to his face too much for the poor lab to handle.

The flashlight rolls away but Ben hardly notices, between trying to hold the dog away from him for just a moment to breathe and trying to push himself out from under the porch with his good hand. He scoots quickly, backing out as Mopsey follows him, still panting hot in his face and making sure not to miss a single inch of his chin in his assault.

"I promise I'm glad to see you too, buddy," he says, once he's almost totally free from the

underbelly of his own porch. Mopsey wiggles himself out much faster, runs back away from him and then comes back to pant excited at his shoulders.

His head throbs where he hit it, his hand stings something awful and Ben backs right up into something firm and solid.

Of course.

Ben scrambles up, grunting at the ache in his knees, and the slow-building pain that flares up in his limbs from the day's work stretching out again. Of course, where there's dog, there might as well be owner, right?

Mopsey wouldn't come all the way down here on his own, he had to have been following at George's heels and Ben dusts off his shirt and his pants and tries to fight down the pink in his cheeks and he isn't actually sure why it's there.

"Hey!" Ben steps back once he looks up and realizes just how *close* he is to his landlord. And then once more when he realizes just how gross he must be - dirty and sweaty and probably covered in dog slobber. "Hi."

"Hello," the outside is a lot brighter than under the porch and George's face is shadowed just enough by the sun to make his expression twice as unreadable as it was the day before. "Sorry to interrupt your work."

"Oh you weren't interrupting anything important," it's the modest truth, really. "Besides, I was almost done down there anyway."

With Ben significantly higher and out of face-licking range, Mopsey resigns himself to wagging his tail into a blur and pressing his entire body weight against Ben's legs. He absentmindedly scratches behind his ears as George nods.

"I just came to check in on you. Make sure your hand was healing properly." George spoke slow. Soft enough that Ben had to lean in just a little to make sure he hears him right between the hard breathing down at his knee and the steady thump of music from his car.

It still makes something in Ben's gut twist. He holds up the poorly wrapped hand - there's a few spots of blood seeping through the bandaging, but he figured that would be expected from all the moving it about he'd been doing. "It's doing pretty good, I think."

But still, George's brow pinches as he frowns. He glances around, to the rake left lying by Ben's truck, to the pile of gardening tools left behind that he'd dug out from the porch.

"Would you mind if I gave it a closer look? Just to be sure it doesn't need stitches after all?"

"Of course! I mean, I don't mind at all. Lemme just turn that off," he says as he points over to his car and he realizes - his truck is the only vehicle he sees. He would've heard George pull up if he'd driven, too. He squints down the road at the farmhouse, pretty far in the distance - not absurd but George hardly looks bothered by the heat.

"Did you walk here?" He asks as he turns off his car, leaning across the passenger seat instead of walking around. He looks over his shoulder and George is staring at something on the ground, giving no indication if he heard or not.

Still, Ben waits for a response, pulling his keys from the ignition and hip-checking the door shut. He gets one after a moment, "Yes, we did. I used to take Mopsey on walks up and down this path

when he was a puppy. Tire him out before bed.” A pause. “So it wasn’t much of a distance. For either of us.”

The pause that they slip into afterwards is a little awkward, but George navigates them out of it with a quick reminder of what he was here for.

“Right! Here, come in,” Ben breezes past, his heart thudding harder than it should be. There’s an anxiety nipping at his heels, right behind Mopsey, as he pushes the door open to usher them both in. “Sorry, it’s a mess right now.”

“You’ve only just moved in, it’s to be expected.”

Ben asks if they need anything, then, ignoring the polite denial, gets the two of them waters, filling a bowl for Mopsey and setting it on the floor over a folded up dishtowel, and Ben thinks he can do this - be the Good Southern Host. If that was a thing in real life, if not, he might as well pretend.

George tilts his head back just slightly when he drinks and Ben does *not* stare at his throat. He watches the dog soak both the towel and his floor instead, that same guilt from before gnawing at his gut. They get a moment of respite and small talk. George asks how the house is holding, asks if Gilbert gave him the local numbers, asks how Ben enjoys the weather all in short, clipped sentences.

“I think I’ll bring someone in to poke around at everything,” he says, setting the glass aside and letting George come forward to take his hand again. His heart ends up in his throat.

And he can’t quite figure out why. Ben’s always been bad around new people - always the one who was rough to start talking, to get to know someone; so he chalks it up to a social sort of anxiety. It’s the only thing that makes sense while his blood roars in his ears.

Slowly, George unwinds the bandaging, making a soft little noise of disapproval once he gets to the final, blood-caked layer.

“So did I need stitches after all?” Ben winces when George pulls away the final bits of gauze - it dried and stuck and George wasn’t exactly making it quick.

“No. If you kept from using it too much it shouldn’t open.” He washes it just like he did the day before, in Ben’s sink.

Ben just huffs, “I wasn’t aware I was supposed to be keeping off it.”

“I thought that was implied,” George deadpans, “given the nature of an open wound, and that they take more than twelve hours to heal.”

It takes a second for it to sink in that, despite the complete passivity of his features and the levelness of his tone, that was a joke. His lips quirk into a bit of a smile as George re-wraps his hand with the same precise military-efficiency.

Then it fades.

“I was gonna see if I could fix up that porch today. I’m guessing you’re going to strongly recommend that I don’t.” He really doesn’t want to be cooped up, staring at that box and the picture that’s sitting on the end of his table. God, the thought alone fills him with too much dread and exhaustion.

George shakes his head. “I could see about it.”

“See about what? The hand?” He waves the heavily and tightly bandaged hand for emphasis and George raises a single brow at him.

“The porch. I could look at it for you. It will most likely need to be entirely rebuilt, however.”

Ben sags at that, he’s always been a fast learner but that seems like... quite a bit. “Got any good numbers for a guy to re-build my porch, then?”

He means it as a joke, but it comes out too exasperated and tired. George fixes him with another one of his unreadable looks - this one somehow different from the rest. Confused? Conflicted? His fingers wrap around the bits of gauze left on the first roll. Nothing much, maybe enough to get halfway around Ben’s hand.

It takes Ben a little too long to realize he’s fiddling with it.

“I could, if you’d like.” It’s not enough to break the silence, his voice is too soft for that, but it does peck at it just a bit. “I recently had a rather large barn taken down to plan another plot - I held onto the wood. It wouldn’t be enough to rebuild it completely, of course, but Gilbert - or yourself - can find very good reclaimed wood locally for the rest.”

Ben moves forward with no clear goal in mind, only the urge to suddenly be closer, and already has half a million thoughts all stumbling towards his mouth at once. “You really don’t have to do that. I mean, I could probably figure it out on my own - help would be appreciated though, if you know what to do. Which I’m sure you do, actually, but I can’t ask you to build a porch. I don’t even know... negotiable rates for porch building to pay you comparatively? I could look those up though -”

“You already pay me for the land, Benjamin, my services wouldn’t cost you anything additional,” George interrupts - quickly and with possibly the most solid his voice has ever sounded. Ben immediately clams up in response.

It’s a hard offer to say no to.

So he doesn’t.

“I don’t know what to say, thank you? I mean, I’m gonna do *something* to pay you back.”

“That isn’t necessary,” George reiterates.

The swamp cooler must be having another one of its problems because there’s a heat filling into the tiny kitchen, evident on the pink flush that starts down under the collar of Georges shirt and stains the tips of his ears.

Ben tugs at his shirt. When did it get so warm?

He clears his throat. Then George does.

“So when did,” he starts at the exact same time George does: “I can start..”

Another round of throat clearing, some shuffling and Mopsey tips the now-empty makeshift water bowl. Ben crouches down to grab it and refill it, “You go first. You can start when?”

“I was going to say whenever was most convenient for you. I’d need to take measurements first, of course, but once I do I can start to remove the old set up today.”

Ben chews on his lip for just another moment, watching his own feet shuffle in his now dirt-scuffed boots. This does mean having someone around, he realizes, when he was searching for solitude - but also having George hobble together a passable porch seems like a fantastic deal. Especially if it was labor he wasn't paying for.

He did drain quite a bit of money into the house - though he still had plenty to spare. What little family Nate had had been fairly well off. One by one that wealth all teetered off and trickled down to him.

Ben's quarter-life crisis to "get everything settled just in case" inspired Nate's.

But just because that had come to him doesn't mean he had to blow it all at once - the idea of going back to work in a classroom was... too much for now. Far, far too much for now. But everything feels like too much - like even waking up in the morning is another chore that he has to go through.

Really, George should leave. Ben should tell him it wouldn't be a good idea, that he'd feel too indebted to his landlord, that he just couldn't let himself watch George do this for him. And he opens his mouth with the full intention to go through with it, to say it all at once:

"Today sounds great," he finds himself saying, instead. "Do you need anything? Measuring tape or whatever?"

George nods and asks what sort of things Ben has - Ben motions for him to follow, crossing the living room without too much zig-zagging and regretting the fact that he didn't ever put the goddamn table up. It still juts out too far and too wide and taking up just too much space.

And it's painfully clear that Ben slept on the futon (feet dangling off the side) since climbing the ladder up to his bed was a big no-go with his hand.

And that stupid box is still sitting there and Ben refuses to look at it as he passes in favor of the still-packaged tools he got from his ill-fated Ikea trip - but when he turns around to hand the armful off to George he finds him staring at the still-propped photo.

Ben's heart stops for a universe of reasons.

Firstly: the inevitability of questions that he doesn't want to answer.

Secondly: the fact that his landlord is staring at the framed picture of Ben kissing Nate - no way to pretend like either of them aren't men, no way to pretend like it's just something of a joke about to be tossed out. Not when it's so clearly lovingly arranged. Of course, he's *out*. He's been out for ages - he doesn't have any reason to hide nor any desire to but that well-used instinct to keep that part of himself secret rears up again.

It protected him growing up in a small, religious, town - it'll protect him in a small, probably religious, town once again.

At least, hopefully. He can't deny the similarities between Setauket and this place and, with such an ease he's felt around George he wants to draw out this moment so that he doesn't have to watch it crash.

George fiddles with one of his fingers and looks, quickly, around the rest of the house.

It's only been seconds, by the time he turns to Ben and asks, "Is this your boyfriend?"

There's something slow and cautious in his voice, a careful consideration edging that now-familiar

monotone towards a new sincerity. Ben tries so hard to read it, so hard to analyze every single inflection and curl of his lips around the words in the moments before his answer.

He wants to say yes. Yes, Nate is (was) his boyfriend, yes, he's gay. No, he won't be seeing him around, no, he won't be hearing them. He wants to already start planning how he's going to get his money back and move back out and somewhere else in such a hurry.

The words stick to his throat, though, and refuse to budge no matter how many times he tries to swallow down around them.

"It doesn't matter to me," George ends up saying when he glances over and Ben realizes he must be wearing the most stricken, terrified look. "If someone in town gives you trouble, though, Gilbert and Adrienne would be more than glad to offer their assistance."

He takes the tools from Ben's numb, unmoving, hands carefully. He can't put the words to order to meaning in his mind just right and they all fit together like the wrong corners of a jigsaw puzzle at first. *It doesn't matter to me.* Easily the most comfortable response Ben could've hoped for in the moment and, slowly, he relaxes just a fraction.

"It's complicated," he says, though he finally sees what George had been touching while he examined the photo. A wedding ring. Ben's mind tiptoes back to the woman in the pictures - to the way she dropped off from them so suddenly while pictures of the rest of the people seemed to continue.

"I understand," George says, and thankfully, doesn't ask another question regarding the photo. He takes the measurements in silence, Mopsey lounging out on the porch as the sun begins to set. Ben brings him water once or twice but mostly he watches, comfortable there with the final edges of tension fizzling out back into the same quiet comfort.

George leaves, soon after he's finished with his quick inspection and a few harmless questions regarding the porch itself. Ben asks, half out of politeness and half out of the sudden, inexplicable, desire for George not to go, if he'd like to stay for dinner.

Ben got enough stuff to last him a while, it'd be no problem to whip something up fast.

"I've got a few... people coming over tonight," he explains by way of refusal. "You are more than welcome to join, however. It's a monthly dinner Gilbert likes to throw in my home."

He doesn't want George to go but the idea of being surrounded by people he doesn't know makes him queasy. Besides, he thinks of Gilbert - friendly, open, charismatic - it must be a pretty big event. Maybe a town thing? Ben represses a shudder at the thought of dodging questions and comments for just barely as long as it would take to not seem rude.

Even the promise of the three people he at least *sorta* knew wasn't enough to entice him. "I have a lot to do, still," he tells him, and George nods knowingly. He steps back from the house and whistles once - sharp and high and Mopsey is back at his feet - the pair head down and Ben goes back inside, alone.

He gently places the photo on its face and curls himself as small as he can possibly be in the corner of the futon.

Ben never did get that flashlight back...

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It works. That's all it has to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.” - Henry David Thoreau

Ben wakes up early. Not particularly because he went to bed early but because a gnawing anxiety prods him into consciousness just as the first dredges of sunrise start to seep in through his windows. George had mentioned the night before he'd be back in the morning and Ben never actually got a time out of him.

There's no way George would be there before sun-up, but still Ben's stomach flips around at the idea of being caught unprepared. He organizes and reorganizes and re-reorganizes the books on the shelf build into the wall to shake off the final thoughts of his latest nightmare: *Nate, asleep beside him. His chest rose and fell like he was breathing, he snuffled and mrrr'd a couple times but no matter how much Ben shoved and screamed he wouldn't wake up.*

It haunts him past the time he spends separating all the haphazardly placed books into categories. Poli-Sci books with carefully placed dog-ears of points he wanted to refer back to ages ago, biographies with color-coded sticky notes, aged science fiction with well-worn cracks in their spine. So he moves towards internal organization.

First by author for everything.

Then he moves his biographies around by age and era and spends a little too long trying to remember if he ever actually finished reading the *American Maelstrom* on his shelf or just ran out of things to mark halfway through.

He puts it back in place anyway, then re-sorts them all again by books he's read and personal favorites (the worn copy of Schlesinger's Robert Kennedy biography he's had since high school right at the front) and then again by type and then again and then again until he's back at authors. The third shelf is a little under a quarter empty.

Ben gives in, crosses the tiny room in just a few short steps and puts the chanchito there. He fits rather neatly in the spot provided, Ben thinks.

He cranks the volume on his phone up and leaves it on the edge of the sink as he showers as quickly as he can - just in case - and re-dresses in the same level of fervor. He actually shaves this time - after too much time squinting in the mirror and debating if the look was more rugged or

pathetic .

It doesn't hit him until after he's started his coffee and checked his phone that George doesn't have his number. George's note had been moved to the fridge with a magnet bear from Maggie Valley - a relic from Ben and Nate's awful long weekend spent in North Carolina - but Ben hasn't used it.

So, unless George took his number from his application, he wouldn't have it.

He contemplates calling him first but it's hardly six-thirty and he wouldn't want to wake him.

Especially if he'd had a lot of people over or a late night with his dinner party. (Ben would admit to peeking out his window once or twice, just out of a tentative curiosity. He only ever saw two cars parked in front of the farmhouse. Which only furthered his confusion.) So he doesn't call him. But he does make sure to make enough coffee for two, just in case George swings by early.

Ben's finally put up the table and moved the ticking timebomb of a box of memories into the closet for now. The picture ended up on the shelf beside the clay pig, upright this time but in a place where it couldn't stare at Ben all day.

Already the room looked better. He's nearly done with stacking all his boxes when he realizes just how unpacked he really is. There's a twinge of self-satisfaction in his gut as well as a little cluster of pain right underneath it all. This really is where he's staying then, isn't it?

The sound of a car rumbles closer, cutting out once it gets right outside his house. It's the only prelude to the soft knock at his door that sends his heart racing once again. Running a quick hand over the top of his head to smooth his hair a little, Ben answers.

Seven-thirty. On the dot.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be awake or not," George admits, those cool eyes lingering on Ben curiously for just a moment before flickering back away. "I figured it would be a reasonable time to get started, before the heat got too intense."

"Of course," Ben steps aside to let him in, "I've been up for a bit, so it's no big deal. Do you want some coffee?"

"That would be very appreciated." George steps inside and looks around and Ben feels that clawing anxiety digging itself into his gut once more. He picked up a bit but it's still a mess - somewhere between a wreck and a literal disaster.

He fixes the coffee for him quickly, *black, plenty of sugar*, as George tells him when he asks.

Mopsey was too distracted chasing birds out in the garden, but George assures he'll find his way over once he's done. "He's smart," he says, "despite what he likes for you to think."

George works nearly silently through the day, only ever speaking when Ben makes conversation - but he gets the distinct impression that his focus stays mostly on the work at hand, so he stops after a bit. Instead he brings him water when he's looking tired, insists on bringing him lunch when it creeps closer towards noon and the heat is getting stifling again.

The next day is just the same. And the day after that and the day after that - and they fall into rhythm.

George shows up at seven-thirty precisely, to a cup of coffee already waiting for him. Sometimes Mopsey is following on his heels, sometimes he isn't and he comes by an hour or two later. Ben

usually throws a stick a few times for him, talks to George, asks if there's anything he can do to help and gets the same responses every time:

"Actually, another water would be much appreciated."

"Just keep this ladder steady for me?"

"Keep Mopsey busy, if you would, or else he'll be chewing on your support beams."

He can convince George to stay for dinner occasionally, but usually he just shakes his head, ducking back half a step and insisting he get back for some reason or another. He needs to water certain plants again before it gets too late - he needs to get some work done at the house - Gilbert was planning on coming over.

Occasionally they sit, eating whatever Ben made, on the folded down tailgate of George's pick-up. George points out the line of his property as it goes off into the distance, "You'll probably see Adrienne and Gilbert racing along the edge there towards the end of the season. I told them they're going to have to change their path to avoid cutting through your plot."

"I don't mind, really."

"You haven't heard the racket they make," George insists, with a faded, warm sort of fondness in his voice.

July bleeds through and Gilbert was right about there being plenty of fruit trees hanging around. Ben starts making his way down to the trees that line the property once every couple days - grabs an armful of peaches and some ripe-looking cherries.

The first time he brings George out a peach iced tea, fresh right from the trees outside his place, his chest aches with a feeling that he can't quite identify; a thin veil concealing its precise meaning from his conscious mind. Ben stumbles over it, trying to figure out just what makes his gut twist and curl in on itself whenever George breaks through his self-imposed stoicism and gives Ben that little half-smile.

Or what makes him wish he could remember the exact smell of his aftershave from when he pressed just a little too close to get past Ben.

Or what makes him lie awake in his bed, not afraid of the nightmares that haunt him but thinking and listing out all the points he wants to bring up to George come morning. Looking towards seeing him again with more anticipation than dread.

It's all too confusing, too much, too soon - he can't place the feeling into the right compartment, into the right little place where he can label it and store it away to never handle or deal with. It just sort of lingers there. Heavy in his stomach after another night of wondering.

Another night of staring at the ceiling.

But, things change. The old porch comes down quicker than Ben expected - what little wood that could be salvaged ends up stacked off to the side and George starts to haul away what can't.

After George makes sure the cut to his hand is now nothing more than an occasionally-sore mostly-healed mark, he let's Ben help clear away the piles of too-rotted or too-busted wood, back and forth from pile to truck with armfuls of splintery lumber. They talk too, or more George listens and asks the occasional question while Ben talks.

He doesn't think before he responds - dust kicking up as he drops another armful into the bed of his truck: He tells him about teaching ("You like some students more than others, it's hard to avoid, really."), about Setauket ("Small, but nice."), every surface-level, simple thing they could touch on without straying into potentially deep territory.

When he makes George sit inside and take a breather - he asks him the questions instead. Moving about bringing him another cold water or double checking if his knee is alright because George mentioned something about it being stiff some mornings. Asking if George grew up near by (he did, a few miles down the road), if he'd done anything before farming (not really, no),

George never once asks about Nate and Ben never once asks about the woman from the photos.

It works. Ben gets up every morning with enough time to shower and tie his hair back out of his face. He starts to shave every few days, once the scruff gets less manly and more mangy. He puts in his contacts every morning, takes them out each night - the comfort of the ritual met with the little seedlings of assurance that maybe this is what better feels like?

He doesn't know if it's better - but it works.

He fixes two cups of coffee (one with too much sugar and a third a cup of milk and the other no cream, and only a fraction less sugar than Ben's) and it works. It just... works.

Ben doesn't exactly realize how well it works until he's alone, several hours later, the night rolling overhead with the distant promise of more thunder and more storms.

"If it rains there's not much we can do," George had told him - and Ben was sure he was just projecting the disappointment he heard in his voice.

"Of course. Don't feel obligated to come over if it does."

The comfortable feeling had replaced itself with something hard and thick and thoroughly uncomfortable. Solidly awful, like dread, that rises when the rain pelts the roof with a steady beat and settles itself high in his throat.

He'd spent the entire day without him - the first time in weeks. He woke up just as early, tried watching the storm rage and thunder and shudder around him - soothing until he realizes the steady dripping sound was coming from inside the house.

Another thing on the to-do list, it seems, as Ben moves a bowl under the leak. He contemplates calling George about it, but he gets that queasy knot in his gut again.

You don't wanna seem needy, part of him taunts, making him leave his phone on the counter in the kitchen instead. He tries reading, he tries cooking, he tries tidying up once again but everything feels so... off. Like it isn't the same place Ben had been living for a month now - like it isn't the place he bought.

The shadows tower above him, creep into the corners and he swears the house was smaller two days ago. Is it the lack of clutter he'd finally managed? Is it the way he moved the futon against a different wall? It just isn't quite right. When it creeps closer to ten and the rain dies down, Ben tries to sleep.

He really does - but the darkness eats at him from over the sides of his bed, up into the loft. So he gets up instead, on a leaden sort of instinct and muscle-memory, and slips down from his bed.

It feels big.

Too big. Too much space. George fills it all whenever he visits and Ben just guesses he must've gotten used to the taller, broader man being there so much that without him it all just feels... big.

Ben gives up on sleeping at the moment and glares at the ladder that leads up to the loft - even since his hand healed he's been spending too many nights sleeping on the futon.

Sleep doesn't come when he's lying in that too-big bed alone, and when it does he wakes up half-thrashing and choking on his broken sobs. The nightmares have been getting worse. Intense and hazy at the same time.

Sometimes they're in the loft in Virginia, tangled together with soft moans and gentle gasps. Nate's hands feel too big and too rough on his hips but his lips so familiar where they suck and bite at Ben's throat.

Others, they're in New Haven again. The same repetition of all the ways Ben failed to stop him from leaving. All the same pleas to not leave, to stay, to just... stay there.

He doesn't tell George about the dreams - but he told him he's had trouble sleeping (he had been so out of it and exhausted one morning that George was checking him for a fever) and the next morning he brought a bag full of dried chamomile and a mesh ball strainer.

George, apparently, grows it in his personal garden, refusing money for it. ("I don't sell from my garden. It's for personal use.") Ben doesn't question it anymore than that. He doesn't need to.

He fixes himself a cup with numb hands. Watching the water slowly turn a green-yellow while he ignores the pressing coldness that fights through the oppressive heat of early August. It sends a chill up his spine, making him shiver just slightly when that hollow, empty feeling doesn't go away. Even when he turns on the light and curls up on the futon.

Two cups of tea, sweetened with just a spoonful of honey to cut through the natural bitterness, and he still isn't asleep. He does a few times, but flashes of feeling and color and the ghost sensation of calloused hands dragging up his skin jerk him upright and awake again.

The movement splashes now-cold tea over his hand he bites back a sigh as he sets it down.

He doesn't want this. He doesn't want to pass out on his futon again, he doesn't want to close his eyes and see the ghost of everything he's lost already, he doesn't want to cry about it anymore. He doesn't *want* to feel like his world came crashing down. He doesn't want to do anything here, alone.

It strikes him hard, trembling hands wrapped tight around the mug.

He doesn't want to be here alone.

He doesn't want to be anywhere alone, he doesn't want to be here, he doesn't want to be in this goddamn house in this goddamn state - he wants his old bed and his friends and his apartment. He wants to wake up early and fit in a run and a long shower before he leaves for the job he wants.

He wants these stupid, confusing emotions to stop swelling in his gut, he wants that picture gone, he wants someone - anyone - to tell him what to do, what he's feeling, what he wants and what he needs because, for just a moment, he doesn't know.

He wants Nate.

Tears well hot and he snuffles to try and keep it back.

All those feelings he pretends to control all whip around and lash out from him at once and he's so dizzy with the sudden agony of being so *lonely* that he could hurl right there.

He wants Nate so bad it hurts down to his bones, he wants him so bad his breath comes sharp and hard and difficult. But he won't.

He can't.

Nate's never coming back. No amount of wishing, no amount of *wanting* is going to bring him back. He's gone and he's never coming back. The tears sting when he rubs at them, biting so hard on the inside of his cheek he's tasting blood. He can't. He won't. He can't. He won't. He won't spend another night awake, crying. He won't shatter, he won't break again.

He can't.

He doesn't know if he'll be able to piece himself together again if he does. He's already barely holding all the cracks and chips in place as it is

It's a moment. That's all it is - of weakness, of desperation, of a pressing and sudden and pained urge to not be alone anymore. He fumbles for his phone and navigates through his tear-blurred vision to a familiar contact but he can't bring himself to press to dial.

His breath comes harder and more ragged and there's someone whispering in his ear, "*Breathe, Sunshine, it's okay,*" but it isn't helping.

"*Call him, it's fine,*" sugar-sweet and soft and Ben's hollow chest burns hotter. He doesn't want this, he doesn't want Nate's voice in his head. He doesn't want the pain in his throat or the fire in his lungs.

How pathetic would that be? Calling his landlord, the dude fixing up his place for him, because he's tearing himself apart at the seams. Because he can't hold it in anymore, because he's gotten a taste of what comfort is and George dulls the pain of being alone.

It works, and Ben stares at the watery back-light of colors. He can't call George - he wants to - but his fingers won't move to dial. Instead, they go back, back to something else. Back to a line of increasingly desperate texts he hasn't read.

Back to something else. He can't be alone, he can't call George, he's out of options.

He closes his eyes, bites harder at his cheek, and hits the little green 'Call' button. It rings.

And rings.

And rings.

"*You've reached Anna Strong, I'm not at the phone right now so if you'd like to leave a message: wait for the beep.*"

It overcomes him like a wave, drowning. He drops his phone and goes under - no one and nothing to keep him from slipping down.

He curls in on himself. Hands fisted in his own hair, face buried in his knees, and he breaks.

Now with 24% more Sads

There's a parallel one-shot in the works that serves as a piece from George's POV during this time.

Eight Million Thanks to Iniquiticy, Catalpa-Waltz and Alexample for their continued help in keeping me from Drowning in this fic <3

I answer questions sometimes on my [Tumblr](#) because Direct Communication is Scary

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Ben receives a phone call and a visit once the storm breaks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Drudgery is as necessary to call out the treasures of the mind, as harrowing and planting those of the earth. -- Margaret Fuller

They said he'd have good days, and he'd have bad days.

Needless to say, this is a bad day.

His phone rings twice the next morning. Ben sleeps through both calls.

He sleeps later than he has in the last month, past the ending of the storm, past the breaking of the clouds - past noon and one and well into two in the afternoon. It isn't refreshing or comforting in the least.

He wakes up sore.

An ache in his head, his nose rubbed raw and stuffy. He's tangled himself into a position long enough that just makes his hips hurt and his arm numb from lying on it. He's still groggy but the idea of sleeping more just weighs down on his back and makes every inch of him throb like one lousy, pathetic pulse.

Not worth it, he thinks, to laze around like this. But it's not exactly like he has much else to do, the ground is soaked from two straight days of rain - probably a gross, muddy mess where all that dirt used to be.

Nothing but puddles and slosh.

Does he really wanna peek out his window at that, just wishing George would show his face?

No. No he does not.

So instead, he takes one of the pillows he'd shoved off of him in his fitful restless tossing and turning and pulls it over his head to block out the invasive sunlight. Maybe if he lies here long enough, it'll all stop. The world will pause in its spinning and just give him a goddamn minute to breathe. To relax.

That's all he needs, he thinks as he curls up - still sore but with no intention now of getting up.

Maybe he can sleep until tomorrow - until next week, next month, next year.

It's fine, no one would come looking for him anyway, maybe George but he'll probably be glad he doesn't have to work on Ben's problems anymore. He's paid out for a year's worth of rent he's allowed to do whatever the fuck he wants on it. Even nothing.

Somewhere too close to his face, his phone buzzes again. His heart makes a weak attempt at skipping and he peeks out at it.

Ignore it, his entire body thinks at once. *Ignore it. Go back to sleep.*

But there's a sliver of him, just a faint, glimmering little sliver deep, deep wedged down between his ribs and embedded hard in the muscle of his heart that thinks: *What if it's George?*

He doesn't want to pick it up if it's him, he doesn't want to ignore it if it's him. He really just wants his phone to stop buzzing incessantly against the floorboards. Ben hangs his hand off the edge of the bed - ending up rolling onto his stomach to do it.

Do at least this, Nate's voice tells him.

Just this.

At least answer your phone, tell him you're sick. You caught a cold, a flu, some little bug that'll leave you bedridden for a few days and make you too gross to be around. He misses the call and the relief-slash-dread mixture that floods him is only good for a few seconds before it starts to ring again.

Clearly, someone needs him. Not that back-to-back calls are anything new in his life since he left but there's an ache of panic somewhere in him that leads him to want to answer now - he can't leave George without a decent excuse.

His fingers close around the plastic and he blindly answers and brings the phone into his cocoon of duvet.

"Benjamin Francis Tallmadge, you've been dodging my calls, you haven't returned a single text, or e-mail, your voicemail box is full - and then you call me in the middle of the night and don't pick up the next day. Do you have any idea how worried I've been?"

Maybe he should've checked the caller ID before he answered it. He's tempted to hang up, just drop the phone down off his bed, roll over and go back to sleep. He needs it, he's been getting up early and it's only, he pulls his phone away from his face to check it, two-forty-five.

"Anna." A pause. "I've been busy, sorry."

"Ben..." She trails off with a static-y sigh and Ben can feel that desperate, childhood-friend pity and concern and worry and relief wafting through the speaker. His stomach churns. He could puke if he'd eaten anything recently.

"I'm fine, Anna, I mean it. This move was good for me, I promise." It even sounds like a lie to his own ears, despite the fact that he thinks it might be true. At least a little.

This is the first time he'd spent so long in bed wishing he would disappear in a really long time, so he can't really chalk it up to a complete failure. At least not yet.

"I met some people up here. Neighbors." He conveniently doesn't mention that he's only seen Gilbert three times since he's moved in. "Talked to a couple people in town." The waitress he almost yelled at counts, right?

She's coming up with her rebuttal on the other end, he can sense it like an oncoming storm so he tries to get ahead of it while he still can.

"I'm doing good, Anna. Last night was just... hard. I was thinking about," his voice goes a little thick and he has to swallow around the lump in his throat, "him."

"I'm sorry I missed your call. I really am, I just... Ben, none of us have heard from you in a month. We didn't say a word about all this when we helped you pack up everything and throw it in storage or when you took off in the middle of the night without saying goodbye. We were worried about you, we still are. Even more now that you've haven't even thought to call when you got there." Anna snuffles on the other end and another fresh wave of agony and guilt builds in Ben's gut. *"And with next month coming up so fast..."*

He closes his eyes, he can't think about that. He won't think about that. It's not like making his friends upset is his goal, he just needs this. He needs time. Especially now.

"Anna, I-"

"Need time. Space. I - we - know, we're giving it to you as much as we can. I'm not going to ask you to come home, Ben, you know that."

Home.

It leaves a funny taste in the back of his throat when he thinks about it. Home is supposed to be a one-bedroom in New Haven with cracks in the linoleum, a fridge that only closes the second time you try, a couch that sags, and Nathan waiting for him. Home is supposed to be Nathan.

Home isn't something he has anymore.

"I know," he echoes, numbness spreading out to his limbs. "I shouldn't have called you last night, sorry. I was just freaking out."

"Don't apologize," she insists, going a little quiet as she shifts her phone from shoulder to shoulder, *"I told you, you can talk to me anytime. I meant it."*

"Thanks. Really though, I'm fine now."

She hums into the speaker, clearly disbelieving.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"When has my answer ever stopped you, Annie? Go ahead."

"Are you still in bed?"

Fuck. He doesn't know how she knows - maybe there's the sheets rustling or the fact that she's literally been at his side since they were six years old, but she knows. Lying would be useless against her, would only strengthen her argument that he isn't okay, but he gives it a shot anyway.

She sees right through him. Their back and forth goes on for a bit after that - Ben tries to convince her he's okay. Last night was a fluke, he's fine, she doesn't need to call and check in on him like this - really.

Anna has her own life, her own husband, her own job. She doesn't need to be taking care of Ben all the time. She doesn't need to offer to come down to spend the weekend with him next month - he's

a big boy, he tells her, he can take care of himself.

The farther they go, the longer they go, the more worked up they both get - as most of their tough-love conversations go.

It ends with her breaking first: "*Get up, go wash your face and put on some clean clothes.*"

And he does it, but not without a significant amount of grumbling.

The mirror is just as unforgiving as it was a month ago when he splashes some water over his scruffy cheeks. He looks awful.

Bloodshot eyes above dark bruises. His nose is a bit pink and raw from rubbing it all night - he looks just as hollow and dead as ever. Cheekbones sharper than they should be, collarbones sticking out over the edge of his shirt. Thin. Too thin. Thank God Anna didn't *see* him. She'd be on the interstate already to drag his ass back to New Haven before he died out there in the middle of nowhere.

She doesn't usually press herself into his life like this.

Before everything, they were close. She was the sister he never had, the first person he came out to when he was so terrified of his parents' scorn and Caleb's mocking - he trusted in her. She was the first one of his friends Nate met, she was the first one of his friends he called when he died.

She was the one who stayed.

She was the one who held him all night.

He's never felt so goddamn selfish in his life. Anna had a life - and she most certainly still has one - outside of him, but he was a mess when Nate died, unable to function, unable to hold himself together for *months*.

It was like his entire world shattered, and he's still stuck slicing himself open on all the jagged shards he keeps finding tucked under in the dark shadows and in the empty spot in his bed.

Ben stares at his own haggard reflection for a few moments longer, letting the water drip down his chin.

He puts on clean clothes, as per Anna's request, and doesn't crawl directly back into bed. He'd only feel worse if he did and he knows it and he knows how badly he wants to all the same. Curl up in a ball and just hurt.

It's all he wants to do.

"*Unproductive.*" The voice in the back of his mind is fuzzy. Just like his dreams - blurred around the edges and morphed and wrong and right. It sounds gruffer today, shorter. Just like Nate's hands in his dreams feel bigger, rougher. It's not a thought he wants to examine all that much today as he stands, idle, in his kitchen in a pair of basketball shorts and a ratty *Harvard Sucks* t-shirt.

He moves on to stand in his living room instead, half-hoping that train of thought is going to tuck itself right up with his dishes and not follow him out.

Luckily, he doesn't have time to consider the potential thoughts before someone knocks tentative and quiet at his door.

Ben doesn't have to think about who it is. He doesn't want to answer it, he doesn't want to ignore him. His feet move without his express permission anyway.

George clears his throat once the door opens, eyes flicking up and down Ben for just a quick, calculating moment. It's hard to miss the pity in his eyes, even if he carefully masks it instantly. Part of Ben just hopes George'll think he's hungover.

"The rain stopped," George says, clearly at a loss, "but it's still too damp to do much."

"Right, I thought that too."

George shifts on the patch of dirt that currently constitutes his doorstep twice before Ben can summon the energy to step aside and let him in. It's only been a few days but his place is messier than it has been in a while. The mug from the night before still sits on the floor - a tangle of blankets ended up balled up on the futon. The clothes he just stripped out of are in a pile half-kicked into his closet.

There's an empty tissue box sitting sadly between the trash full of used ones and the half roll of toilet paper he opted for instead of finding another box.

The entire place reeks of some pathetic sadness and, if the casting eye and slightly-pinched brow is anything to go by, George has noticed.

"I thought I would check for damages and offer my assistance in preparing a design for the new porch?"

He holds up a half-used notebook that Ben hadn't noticed he was holding.

His chest hurts, his head hurts, and he's so goddamn tired.

"Sure, sounds great."

Ben couldn't sound more hollow and this time George's reaction is much less subtle. He pauses, looking uncertain for a moment before lowering the notebook and glancing back to the door.

"If this is a bad time, we don't have to."

"It's not a bad time, I wasn't doing much today." Or anything, except ignoring all the advice from his friend and going back to bed. At least now if Anna calls him back at some point he can report a solid communication to add to his list of Reasons He's Totally Fine.

Ben pulls down the table, unfolds the chairs and sets them up. George brushes off the offer of coffee but accepts a water that Ben fetches while he flips open the notebook. The designs aren't exactly perfectly artful - but they're clear. Lines at least mostly straight, a few scratches through some words from when George clearly changed his mind.

"I had a few ideas," he explains as he turns the notebook to face Ben when he gets back. He sits slowly, eyes roving over one of the pages and taking it in.

And then doing the same to the next page, and the next. They all sort of blend together, his tired mind only able to really conceptualize the first few before they all start to just end up looking like nothing at all. He feels like shit about it too, there's an obvious amount of work put into these designs and Ben just flips through them casually.

George, again, seems to notice something off with Ben and quietly tells him, "If there's nothing

you like we can design a new one.”

Ben shakes his head, “No, no. I like the, uh, the first one.”

The design is simple, the lines neater and it looks fine. Comfortable. Space for a chair, a little awning overhanging.

George hesitates again, “Are you sure?”

“Totally. Let’s do it.”

“Ben,” there’s a faint edge to his tone that’s wholly unfamiliar. Some shadow of a sharpness that used to be refined but instead has worn down by constant use followed by a sudden abandonment. George takes the notebook back and flips to the first one.

He reads the notes in the margins, in a slow, even tone. The benefits, the struggles and problems. The work involved, the amount of wood involved - etcetera.

And then he does the same to the second, his voice is rough and worn with age but soft. George reads him through all the details of every asinine portion of the building process, and Ben lays his head down on his arms - watching the glass sweat and drop condensation down the sides and pool on the veneer.

George doesn’t seem to mind, not even as he reaches the last concept and Ben’s eyes are closed.

“I changed my mind,” he mumbles into his elbow, “I want the third one.”

There’s a soft hum and a confirmation above him, something shifts and moves off the table but he doesn’t open his eyes to check. There’s paper flipping and the scratch of pencil over paper.

“Let me just make a few notes about what we’ll need to finish this, then I’ll get out of your hair.”

Ben makes a noise of protest, finally pulling his head up, “Stay. It’s fine, I can help, promise.”

George shakes his head, finishes the list and tears it out, “Give this to Gilbert tomorrow. I told him to stop by to see if you needed anything before he went into town. He’s getting things for his monthly event.” A pause. “The invitation extended last month applies again. If you want to.”

Ben takes the list, folds it carefully in his hands, and thanks him. He’ll think about it, the party, but the same creeping feeling of dread sits in his gut. It had looked like a small gathering last night, at least it did when he was watching from his window, but that doesn’t mean this month will be the same, he tells himself.

He joins George while he makes sure the tarp he’d covered the wood in held, while he pokes through and consults the basic design to make more specific adjustments to what he thinks they’ll need.

The edge slowly wears down, the exhaustion still there but softer and not agitated by George’s presence.

He doesn’t ask questions, he doesn’t look for responses or thoughts. He just talks.

About the wood, about the weather. The longest Ben thinks he’s ever heard George talk just solely on his own - and about nothing at all, too. Nothing important or significant or even particularly interesting.

“The one who rented this house before had a garden,” George mentions off-handed, while he leans against his truck, keys in his hand for the last few minutes. “Nothing grew in it, I don’t think.”

That, Ben thinks, would explain the blank, dry-looking patch of dirt and weeds back behind the house.

“I find mine useful.”

“Maybe I should start one,” he says, just as nonchalant - and George’s expression shifts all in a moment.

And, through the numbness in his chest and the exhaustion in his bones and the pain that just seeps into every crack in his body - something warm sparks itself back up into a tiny, tiny little heat. Small and resilient in the core of his being.

Ben can’t find the energy or the want to hate it right now, either.

Chapter End Notes

- Anna is the same as as Ben here, happily married to Selah and running a little inn/B&B with her husband in Setauket.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The ball is waiting to be dropped, lingering there by a thin thread and Ben doesn't want to see it spinning downward just yet. He doesn't want to know that he's right, he doesn't want to know. Because then it all makes sense, all of George's knowing looks, all the ways they avoid subjects with such tact and grace that it's like a ballroom dance. Sashaying and swaying away from the photo on Ben's bookshelf.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.” -- John Muir

Gilbert can, apparently, be very convincing when he wants to be.

At least, that's what Ben discovers once he's sitting in the passenger seat of the worn and dented pick-up, bumping along an old road with the radio crooning out some vaguely country song with the man beside him bobbing his head to the sound.

He had showed up at a reasonable time, spinning the keyring around his finger and Ben had really just wanted to hand off the list, tell him he didn't need anything and go back to sulking. But Gilbert *insisted* that Ben join him.

Ben hadn't gotten a proper look around, Ben hadn't gotten a proper tour.

If he was going to live here it was only right that someone showed him around, “*and we can be sure it will not be George who does the showing,*” he had said, making Ben only a little confused. With all the things he'd said before about George, Ben had almost been led to believe he was a hermit.

And maybe that's the case, but he's been coming over nearly every day for a month now - surely if he was really that insistent to be isolated, he wouldn't have bothered. But Ben doesn't point this out, even if Gilbert asks if he's been seeing more of George since that first glance he'd gotten moving in.

Even if the way he asks seems to imply that he already knows.

Sharp eyes glancing from the road to where Ben's curling in on himself in the passenger seat to ask him if he's been keeping busy holed up in that tiny house. Though, with more and nicer words.

“Yeah, George has been helping me rebuild that porch.”

“I noticed it was absent when I arrived, you say George is helping in this task?” He asks as if it isn't already clear. The list he handed to him is in George's pretty recognizable handwriting - completely matched to the list Gilbert has already.

“Yeah, he offered when he fixed up my hand,” Ben waves the hand he injured that first full day at the place - the cut faded to a pink scar but Gilbert’s brows knit together for a moment before he hums.

Like he’s doing the math in his mind only to find out he’s missing a variable that he can’t solve for - and he’s trying to wiggle the answer out of Ben anyway. It’d be frustrating, if Ben didn’t get the distinct impression that Gilbert and Adrienne were unusually protective of George.

It should be the other way around, Ben figures, but if his assumptions about George are right - then he gets it, he really does.

And he doesn’t blame them in the least.

“I’ve noticed you two spending time together. It’s nice, very nice. George prefers not to visit town, he is a man of solitariness,” Gilbert says after a momentary lapse in the conversation.

“I’m guessing he didn’t get to know the last guy who lived here, did he?”

“I am under the belief George was not aware of his name. He doesn’t socialize often - so you may forgive me for being concerned at this sudden change.” Gilbert’s nose wrinkles for a moment, “I would not use concern, intrigued, more. I have known George since I was young, I care for his wellbeing.”

Ben considers trying to shift the subject more, asking, “So how did you meet him?”

“I was an aimless youth, on a trip from Auvergne, my home in France, to travel the United States.”

Ben makes an impressed noise, “Sounds like quite the vacation.”

“A troubled rich child, I had little else to do at seventeen with an embarrassingly large supply of money. I left my girlfriend behind, Adrienne, and traveled. Reckless, very reckless but when I got bored and lost my way, I worked for George. A week turned to a month and then to years. I left, I moved back to France, got married and came back with my new wife. I came back straight to George, did not even tell him I was coming.”

“Your parents just let you stay in America?”

Here, Gilbert shifts and Ben feels like he’s stumbled upon a question he probably shouldn’t have asked. But it’s too late to take it back, when Gilbert admits: “My parents died when I was very young. It is not so tragic, I think, as instead I had my grandparents. I, for a while, had Adrienne’s parents - and then I had George and Martha. Though I think it is not correct to say I had no parents if I had them.”

Martha. It could be a burst from the half-working A/C or just a sliver of dread that makes Ben shiver.

The woman from the pictures. Long dark hair, that smile that was so warm and welcoming even caught on photograph - the wedding photo with her and George, the ring he kept fiddling with when he asked about the picture of Ben and Nate. The dread blossoms to engulf him.

“Martha?”

The ball is waiting to be dropped, lingering there by a thin thread and Ben doesn’t want to see it spinning downward just yet. He doesn’t want to know that he’s right, he doesn’t want to know. Because then it all makes sense, all of George’s knowing looks, all the ways they avoid subjects

with such tact and grace that it's like a ballroom dance. Sashaying and swaying away from the photo on Ben's bookshelf.

Or the ring on George's finger.

George knows, he has to, he just has to. He has to know and Ben - Ben can't let him. He works so hard on all these fronts and walls that knowing George could see right through him is terrifying.

But the thread frays.

And it starts to snap as Gilbert hesitates, looking for a moment both stricken and rather upset with himself.

"It is not polite to share the story of another but, George does not talk about her often. She died seven years ago; she was his wife. She was a wonderful woman, truly. I was lucky to know all of them when I was younger."

It crashes and shatters and Ben feels... less sick than he thought he'd be. George must be able to tell, just like Ben could tell. Looking into those eyes sometimes felt like staring right into a mirror - the deepness of a distant pain. He should be mortified, he should be guilty and sad and every other negative emotion - it should flood his gut and make him want to hurl out the window going seventy through the thick woods.

All he feels is relief. A heavy, weighted relief.

One he doesn't even have time to examine properly before Gilbert abruptly interrupts: "Enough of that, have I told you the story of when I went hunting with my grandfather and killed this savage animal that had been wreaking havoc on the local farms?"

Ben's brow knits together, trying to assess the sharp whiplash change in conversation, before he looks up and says - with complete sincerity and genuine curiosity, "Uh... no?"

Gilbert straightens and flashes that brilliant, summer-warm grin with pride and intrigue oozing out the corners. "They called it the Beast of Auvergne, and I am the young Marquis who conquered it."

Ben has to pause, hooked up on one word, "Wait - Marquis?"

The grin widens and Gilbert raises a brow at him, "*Oui*, my friend. I am, in a technicality, Marquis de Lafayette."

Sure enough, embellished with what Ben can only assume is a litany of half-truths and exaggerations, the story itself leads into another, and then another and they all last until well beyond their arrival into the small, but functioning town.

"I was, admittedly, drunk at the time - though I still cannot recall where I found the sword I used to challenge him," he wraps it up there as they reach the edge of the Friday bustle about the town. Ben found himself smiling more than he thought he would be, even laughing at a few, more painfully embarrassing moments in the young Frenchman's life.

The earlier tension fades into the background, but the knot of guilt refuses to unwind - however buried it still is - in the quieter moments.

Gilbert proves himself to be quite the tour guide, showing Ben the better places to get things - where he can find the best coffee, the best priced apples outside of the Sunday market (which

Gilbert mentions a few times, always with the same insisting, “ *You should join me, I could use assistance and Adrienne has been rather busy with a pregnant mare on a friend of hers farm.*” Ben kept telling him he’d think about it. And he would.)

They do a few circles, Gilbert points out an antique store in particular that he’s never been in - simply because it’s only open for six hours day on weekends *only*.

“I keep trying to make plans to see, if only to sate my own curiosity. But alas,” he gestures wide to the surrounding area and then drops his arms with half a shrug.

They wander just a bit more, not too far outside of the one street full of shops and little storefronts, before Gilbert asks if he wants to come with him while he picks up the wood and other supplies or hang around for an hour or so. Ben weighs the pros and cons of that just a little. Gilbert's company is nice, but there's a whole other side of the street he hasn't poked his nose through yet.

“I think I’ll stay,” he finds himself saying, almost without realizing it. He doesn’t feel like he should want to stay, where people shoot him friendly smiles and waves and the crowds walk up and down between small chain stores that loom and crush the little shops between them. It should feel overpowering and looming and claustrophobic - but he feels a little weirdly at ease.

Of course, he’s not totally comfortable with the crowd - he ducks away from eyecontact a little too fast, shifts a little too far away from anyone threatening to brush shoulders. But he's not actively not enjoying himself.

It's even more the opposite, he guesses as he tilts his head to read a sign. It all blurs together, and it takes Ben a few seconds to realize that it's three separate points.

“Jesus Christ, King of Kings

Rooms for Rent

Local Honey”

He hardly notices a woman appear in his line of sight.

“Hey there, darlin’, are lookin’ to rent a room for a bit? We've got the fairest rates in town and a good breakfast,” she grins at him and Ben is a little taken aback.

He even steps back, shifting away he clarifies, “No I actually moved up here a month ago. I'm just now getting around to looking around, I guess.”

“Oh!”

There's a familiar rush of dread and he feels his entire body tense. *Don't ask questions*, his mind begs, just like it did in the diner and Ikea. *Don't ask questions, don't ask questions*. It builds and builds and builds and he can feel his heart climbing up into his throat, ready to jump off at a moment's notice.

She purses her lips and ducks back where she came for a moment, returning with a small jar in her hand before Ben can think to dart back into the crowd.

The woman holds it out.

Ben stares at it for a second. And then another one, blinking a little owlishly. He expected interaction, just not good interaction.

Her look is expectant and he ends up taking the little jar of honey as she gives him a warm, genuine welcome. Admittedly, Ben hovers a little confused before she waves him goodbye. Then he wanders, rolling the jar around in his hand and he's halfway through poking through the third store before he realizes he never got her name.

The jar's label offers no indication.

He'll have to ask Gilbert later.

There's a few other things Ben finds around town, some more interesting than others. There's a chicken sale (with a minimum purchase of six chickens), a bright and vibrant hand-painted sign that claims there very well could be "five types of ticks on your dog right now!"

Instantly, Ben thinks of Mopsey - undoubtedly tickless given how careful George seems to be with taking care of him.

With his too-big ears, and all too eager to get Ben to play. Bringing squeaky toys and ropes from George's farmhouse all the way to Ben's little house. Ben has a bowl specifically for him now (and a jar filled with Milk Bones), on a towel in his kitchen - refilled every morning with fresh water, just as regular and part of his schedule as making George coffee.

The little dog has even gone so far as to leave one of his favorite rubber bones down by the side of the house - spending his mornings gnawing away at it slowly while he watches Ben and George talk or work.

Ben's still thinking about it when Gilbert finds him again, and he's only half-listening to the droll of talk about the entire exchange Gilbert must have had with the seller. He's got part of his mind on that, trying to be polite and another part on the jar in his hand and the echo of her, "*A little welcome to the county, then.*"

And finally, the last little bit dedicated solely to the warmth that floods his gut when he thinks about how accustomed he's become to the ball of fur and slobber that snores on his futon and the hulking frame that fills out the miniscule space of his living room in a wholly comfortable way.

Gilbert tells him if he still wants to join them for dinner he's more than welcome,

"George exaggerates," he sighs, long and desperate, "including you and George, it would make for seven people. The only ones you have not met already would be Alexander and his girlfriend - it is not some large party put together for celebration. It is only tradition."

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"You would not be," he insists, once again glancing sideways at him, "it would be nice to know more about the man we share our land with, wouldn't it? Besides, maybe if we supply you with enough drink you would agree to assist with the stand on Sunday."

The curl of his lips is enough to make Ben huff in amusement, leaning back. If it was smaller, he could handle it, he thinks. He's within walking distance back to his house if he wants to bail early, he knows most of the people there.

Really, there's not a lot of reasons he can think of to say no - besides how exhausted he is of interaction for the day.

He can leave early, he tells himself, if he really wants to.

Besides, George'll be there. His heart clenches hard and painful in his chest for just a single, lingering moment and he knows he just saw him the afternoon before but part of him misses the man already and part of him wants to hole himself up and hide himself away considering George had seen him at his absolute worst.

But he didn't flee, he read to him, slowly and deliberately and even if it was just the plans for decks and porches it was still soothing in its own way.

Nothing demanding, just simple and innocuous one-sided conversation. Making Ben feel less like a useless mess - and he thinks of the pictures of the woman on the walls and that coolness in George's eyes that might have once been filled with a passionate fire.

He thinks of Gilbert and Adrienne putting themselves between George and the rest of the world and the dog that is so full of an affection clearly learned in secret and the worn-out edge in George's voice.

It would only be fair, considering how much George has helped him. It'd be polite to stop declining the invitation, it'd be the good, neighborly thing to do.

"What time should I be there?"

Chapter End Notes

I alternate wildly between envisioning Daveed Diggs and some other hypothetical tall and skinny Lafayette here. So feel free to plug in whichever version best suits your tastes.

Some points:

- Lafayette once claimed to either have fought or seen this beast. I can't remember which.
- Lafayette once got drunk and tried to duel a dude because he thought the chick he liked was this guy's mistress. She wasn't. Also Lafayette was married.
- In FHIR Gilbert and Adrienne didn't have an arranged marriage, they met as youths in France and fell in love. Dated for many many years, continuing to do so on-and-off while they were in separate countries.

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Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

A quaint little part at a quaint little house.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Keep your face always toward the sunshine - and shadows will fall behind you.” - Walt Whitman

Gilbert tells him seven is fine, Alexander - whoever he is, Gilbert never clarified - would probably be early but Ben can come over whenever. But he wants to shower off the grossness that came from helping Gilbert haul the wood out of the bed of the truck - though he admittedly didn't expect Gilbert to be able to handle as much as he did.

But then again, Gilbert was probably thinking something similar given the state Ben has been in these last few months. But the two managed with only a few trips - but in the setting sun, Ben still felt the exertion as sweat beaded at his temples and dripped down his back.

And, well, he doesn't want to reek in front of new people. So he showers, hovering under the cool spray and contemplating, briefly, all the things he'd learned about George earlier in that afternoon.

Gilbert's words still buzz around in his head.

She was his wife.

Part of Ben figured that, with the ring and the photo, but hearing it was different, hearing the heaviness that laced Gilbert's voice and the way George hides himself away in his home, sending the two others to manage his farm and his property and all the things that require real attentive work. Except his garden.

Gilbert had said before, George tends to that himself.

Ben's arms cross over his own chest, staring down at the silver bottom of the cramped tub. The way Gilbert had talked, seemed to imply like the hermit status was a new thing for George, and if it came out of his wife's death, Ben wasn't about to blame him at all - since it's exactly what Ben's doing anyway.

He turns off the water and lets himself drip there for a couple more minutes, turning his face up to the ceiling.

Was that the sort of life he was looking at now? He tries to imagine himself still here, staring at the same ceiling, in the same little house, seven years from this very moment.

Older, wiser, still full of heart-ache - but with the same group of people that George has, with

George. That little fire that George's visit blew upon sears at the walls of Ben's gut to remind him that it's still there. It wouldn't be so bad, he thinks, to be in the same place.

As long as George is still there, of course. It wasn't half-bad having a friend with him.

Ben shaves, for the first time in far too long, and even goes as far as to pat on some of the until-then unused aftershave he'd picked up a couple weeks ago. In case he needed a cause, he told himself. It called to him most mornings, whenever he knew George was stopping over.

But he avoided using it, something in the back of his mind telling him it was wrong every time. It isn't like he's trying to impress George, he tells himself, he just wants his friends to like him, because they're going to be around quite a bit.

And maybe he was being friendly with George, more than a normal landlord/tenant relationship should be, but they got along so why should there be any cause for alarm?

Nate was always telling Ben to make more friends.

And here he is, making friends. Or at least, making a friend. It's a step in the right direction.

He spends a little too long agonizing over whether he should wear a smooth, wine-red button up or fight the still-thick heat with shorts and a t-shirt by the time he checks his phone, he already knows he's gonna be a couple minutes late.

It's nothing to stress about, but Ben does anyway. So he throws on the button-up and only spends a few minutes desperately looking around to see if there's something he can bring, or something he *should* bring.

He has to take a few moments to calm down the rising tide of panic as he stops in the bathroom once more to check his reflection. His hair is still a little damp and far, far too long. He ties it up in a bun at the top of his head, then down at the bottom of his neck.

Then he tries it loose again, and, in the end, he returns to the mirror one last time to pull it back into a loose ponytail. A few of the shorter front strands slip through as he rushes to make sure he's not forgetting anything significant, make sure he looks fine, smells fine, is dressed fine.

And then, heart hammering, he makes his way to the main house.

There's already two cars parked out front, so he elects to walk. Even with the sun down, the heat is pressing down but it gives him time to even his breathing. Ben has never been a fan of parties. Even in college, Nate would try and drag him to as many as he could, to get him socialized, to get him out and about.

It really never worked and Ben tended to hate every minute of it. But this was a different type of anxiety clawing itself at his insides, but Ben just couldn't quell it like he could his other fears.

What if they hate you, part of him sneers and sure, they'd go to George's plenty and would be pretty easy to ignore after tonight if they really did hate him - but Ben can't pick out why he cares so much. Why it's important that George's friends like him, being liked was never his top priority before.

But now he's craving an approval that he isn't even sure is possible to get, or what getting it entails.

Ben doesn't have time to figure out a strategy, so once he reaches the door and knocks he's decided

it might just be best to play it by ear.

George looks confused and then pleasantly surprised when he opens the door, the range of emotions only hardly flickering across his features - but Ben thinks he's gotten rather good at reading them. Though when George's eyes shift up and then down Ben's body once more, he's more than a little embarrassed.

He should've gone with the more casual outfit, if George's simple daily clothing is anything to be going by.

"Hey. I hope you don't mind, I'm a little late," he tugs at the hem of his shirt, and then at the sleeve, "Gil can be insistent when he wants to be. He, uh, talked me into it."

His heart is racing, a rabbit-pace that makes his mouth feel kinda dry and maybe he should have driven down. It's still pretty humid out and still pretty hot and he's flushing with it, under his collar. But George doesn't make him suffer for too long, stepping aside and holding the door open.

"Of course I don't mind. I said you were welcome, Ben," there was an almost unusual softness to his voice, a little gentle and a little careful and Ben almost wants to wince back from it.

Right. Yesterday.

George probably hadn't expected Ben to actually go through with it, he probably expects him to stay holed up, blubbering still.

He tries to tamp down the latent mortification as he steps inside, the air blissfully cooler.

"Right, yeah. I would've brought something if I wasn't convinced kinda late."

"Believe me, you didn't have to bring anything. Gilbert always seems to prepare like there's going to be a small army invading and waiting to be quartered at any moment."

"Someone should teach him about third amendment."

That draws a soft little noise of amusement out of George as he shuts the door behind him and starts walking beside him towards the main room. The noise makes Ben's heart squeeze and his gut agonize over that specific sensation.

Obviously, he's nervous about the people. Gilbert, he knows. George, he knows. Adrienne - he sort of knows? They'd had once fast conversation when they'd been getting their mail at the same time, polite and short - but that was it.

If push comes to shove, he thinks, he can just hang out with Mopsey.

Though, of course, he seems to be occupied sprawled half over the couch and half over the lap of a mostly unfamiliar man speaking rapid French over his shoulder, towards the kitchen, and distractedly patting the dog's stomach. Ben can recognize him from a few of the pictures on Georges wall - one of him with Gilbert, both looking sunburnt and exhausted, one of him and the woman (who Ben can only assume is Martha) and a few others where he's placed alongside the rest of the small family.

George introduces him with a gesture, "Ben, this is Alexander. Alexander, Benjamin - he is the one who rented the small house on the southern edge."

Alexander turns back forward, looking up at Ben. He gives him a once-over with sharp and nudges

Mopsey out of his lap to stand and offer a hand to shake.

“Just Alex is fine.”

Ben takes it. Alex is both shorter and younger than Ben would have placed him, judging by the photos; but that could just be the nature of his delicate features and slight shoulders making him look like only a slightly-more filled out version of the photographs.

For half a moment, after he releases his hand, Ben thinks he might be talking to George's son. He's got the deeply blue eyes, though filled with an unrestrained flame, and similarly auburn hair tied at the back of his neck. It's brighter than Georges and not laced with the same gray around his temples - and the way he holds himself, his chin high and shoulders back with a quiet pride - certainly reminds him in some shadowed way of George.

But he's quickly corrected.

“If you're thinking what I think you're thinking: no, we're not related.”

He's only been here less than two minutes and already Alex's voice is a little bitter as he moves back and his lips curl into a tight frown. Ben flounders for the right apology, but Adrienne swoops in just in time, two opened bottles of SweetWater in her hands. She presses one into Alex's hands with a scoff.

“Hammie, please do not be yourself for only a few moments. I will tattle to Eliza if you are being rude to the guests. Go find your girlfriend and be useful cutting vegetables.”

Ben opens his mouth to apologize again, but Alex sighs - shoulders sinking down just a little bit. He takes the drink and turns back towards the kitchen. Great. He's messed up already. He's overdressed and presumptuous and far from anything local.

They probably think he's a tool. He's already tired.

He takes the beer Adrienne holds in his direction, with a muffled, “thanks,” and sits down on the couch.

“Forgive him, he's,” her lips purse for a moment, as if he's looking for a more polite way to say what she's planning on saying, “an asshole. He'll get over himself soon enough.”

There's a tense pause and Ben immediately glances around for George, only to find him surprisingly absent. There's a small swell of disappointment that he hopes doesn't show too much on his face. He tries really hard not to look at the photographs on the wall too hard, tries hard not to think *how*.

How can George stand to look at them? How can George stand to see her face, see her grinning at him like she's just saw the sun for the first time?

How does it not break him?

All these questions buzz around his head and make him feel kinda queasy, especially under Adrienne's penetrating gaze.

Ben clears his throat. Twice. “So Gil told me your friends horse is pregnant? How's that going?”

“I didn't think you would be interested in the pregnancies of horses.”

He shrugs, but it's enough for her to take reign of the topic. She talks for a bit about the types of vaccinations the mare needs and when and why - about how she makes sure to take her out for gentle exercising while the owner is away to keep the horse and the foal healthy.

She takes a swig of her own drink and gives Ben a small smile, "I have been given naming rights of the foal, however in return for my assistance."

Slowly, the rest of the house trickles back into the living room. George had been in rapt discussion with Gilbert regarding price fluctuations in crop, and returns with him in tow just as the conversation drifts towards Adrienne's childhood in Paris.

And from there, some more embarrassing stories regarding Gilbert's youth, with the occasional interlude from Alex once he rejoins them, following quickly behind a woman Ben can only assume is Eliza.

"What about you, Ben?" Alex asks, smiling this time, once Gilbert's buried his face in his hands, mortified. He's settled in beside Eliza, one arm loosely draped over her shoulder. "Laf said you moved here from Connecticut, right?"

All the eyes settle on him and the heat starts to build again. He looks around nervously, at the expectant, warm faces all waiting for an answer and he tries to get it all together in his head. He doesn't have to lay his soul bare right this instant and he stalls, very, clearly, with a drink.

He glances over to where George is sitting, in a large wingback and there's a glimmer of genuine, if slightly guarded, curiosity in his eyes. George even flickers his eyes away and around before settling back on Ben.

Ben takes a breath to prepare himself for just a second, if he doesn't mention Nate at all, he'll be fine. If he just... avoids that segment of his life at all, it'll be fine.

"I did, but, uh, I grew up in Setauket." He pauses and figures that probably isn't going to be enough information, "It's on the north shore of Long Island, it's a pretty small town. Kind of a farm town I guess? I moved to New Haven when I went to Yale."

"Yale as in, the university?" George asks, offering the first actual spoken addition in a while. He'd smiled a bit at some of the stories about teenaged Gilbert but never interjected. Ben nods at his question and Alex makes a face that might actually be slightly more interested, or at least a little shocked.

"Yeah, that's where I -" His brain offers a multitude of options to fill in that gap, each one as awful as the next. *Came out to my parents, caused nearly a grand in property damage, met Nate.* Shit, he can feel his throat closing and he has to finish the sentence with a lame, "stuck around to teach. New Haven, I mean, not Yale." His voice is slightly strained to his own ears but no one trades any suspect looks or sneers at him, so he thinks it just might be a plus.

Eliza asks what he taught, trades stories about teenagers and children she's met as part of her work as a social worker. They try, for the most part, to stray away from the sad stories - of kids who went back to bad families, of kids thrown out, of students Ben had who he could tell life was needlessly hard on.

She's halfway through telling a story about a particular young boy who sent her thank you cards every year for the last few years when a buzzing noise cuts her off and she checks a delicate watch and raises her brows, "Dinner's ready. Come on, everyone - go wash up. That includes you, Alex, George."

They talk about as much as they eat still. Ben learns that Eliza and Alex live in DC, where Alex works as a lawyer. He graduated from Columbia for both his undergrad and his law degree (“But Yale is good, though.”), Eliza from NYU (“It really is, isn’t it, *Alexander?*”). He learns that Gilbert and Eliza are amazing cooks, but according to them it’s no match for George and Adrienne’s grilling and nobody cooks like Alex does, once you can actually get him to cook.

He promises to come back the next time they decide to do just that, and George clears his throat, adding in that Ben makes *lovely* peach tea. He should bring a pitcher of it next time, if we wishes. Ben feels the tips of his ears burn under the compliment and his heart picks up again.

Because the attention is on himself, he tells himself, no other reason why.

“Of course,” Ben says, “if you want.”

After dinner, the energy ebbs. The clock hands inch later and later and soon Eliza is bumping Alex and reminding him their drive back home is almost two hours and since *she’s* the one driving he better have his ass in gear.

Once they’re all up, saying their goodbyes, Ben instinctively moves beside George - out of the way of the couples - and Alex fixes them both with a completely unreadable look.

“It was good to meet you, Ben. Hope I’ll see you next time.”

Eliza’s goodbye is pretty similar, but with a more open, warm grin and affectionate arm-squeeze to George.

Gilbert and Adrienne walk them out to their car. Leaving just Ben and George alone there in the living room - they’d been alone before but this feels different in a way Ben can’t place. Tenser. Ben shifts, slightly and George clears his throat and Ben scratches the back of his neck.

“I’m glad I came, this was nice. Thank you for inviting me.”

“I’m glad you came as well,” George says after a moment, keeping his eyes down even as Ben looks up to him. “Gilbert...” There was a pausing breath and Ben tenses for the oncoming blow - but it never lands, “said he found all the things on the list. We can start construction tomorrow if you’re up for it. I could most certainly use assistance with that.”

“I’d love to help. Like really, help-help. Not just sit there being distracting.”

“I found your company very useful,” George looks momentarily conflicted before he amends his thought and adds, “enjoyable.”

For the upteenth time that night, Ben feels himself burn just a little.

“He also told me Maria gave you a jar of her honey as a welcoming gift? That is very much something you should cherish.”

Despite himself, and the still-rolling dread and exhaustion, Ben smiles. Just a little.

- Where I think of Daveed Diggs a lot while writing Lafayette, Ham here is based neither off the Turn Ham or the Musical Ham but instead some short scrawny little fucker. Do with that, what you will. (Mostly, sorta yelyzavetaart's art gives me a lot of #inspo for what Alex looks like and sometimes also Lafayette)
- Don't ask me how Alex's job works with his age because I don't fucking know.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Ben wakes up and it's September 22nd.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Take a course in good water and air; and in the eternal youth of Nature you may renew your own.
Go quietly, alone; no harm will befall you. -- John Muir*

Ben wakes up and it's September 22nd.

He didn't need to check his calendar, his phone, or even think for more than three seconds to know the exact date. He wakes up with a realization that crushes his bones into powder - the lingering sweetness of a too-good dream fading quickly into a long-familiar agony.

Nate curled up on his side beside him (in the lofted bed, with the heat cut through by a soft breeze. It wasn't too hot in his dream, or too cold, but he was filled with a warmth that permeated his entire body), body moving with his slow and steady breathing.

Ben isn't afraid. Isn't worried or anxious at all. He props himself over his boyfriend, dropping kiss after kiss to his cheek and jaw.

"Wake up," he whispers, nipping at his earlobe, "Nate, babe, it's time to get up."

He doesn't feel rushed, either, there's no looming threat of being late or a deadline rushing towards them. Ben feels like they could lie in this bed together until the world ended around them - but he nuzzles down into the juncture of Nate's jaw and neck anyway.

He smells like a familiar aftershave, which Ben's sleep-logic-mind doesn't label strange given the fact that Nate so rarely wore any, and Ben elects to leave quick soft kiss there.

"Wake up, I've got something for you."

But Nate doesn't move.

He keeps breathing, he snuffles into his pillow and curls tighter into the blankets - and Ben isn't afraid.

He should be afraid, he knows he should be afraid but he isn't.

Because he knows Nate is going to wake up, because Nate has to wake up.

"Come on, babe, don't keep me waiting," he huffs, faux-annoyed as his hands brush up under the hem of Nate's shirt, touching worn and smooth skin. Too hard, too wide for Nate's small, slightly-soft form; it doesn't fit but it doesn't need to.

It's Nate, he tells himself, lips pressed against the broad line of his shoulders. It's Nate. It's Nate who rolls onto his back, letting Ben straddle his hips and the shirt's gone in a moment so that he can drag his hands along the powerful lines of his chest (Nate wasn't big. Nate wasn't. Wasn't. The word makes him sick, he doesn't know why) and kiss a strong bicep.

His lips make their way down his body, down, down, down.

Ben looks up with his teeth on the hem of black-and-white flannel pajama pants. It falls into place so smoothly, Nate's skinny arms holding himself up - dimples bracketing his sleepy, hundred-watt smile. Soft blue eyes open, full of raw adoration and distant longing.

"I love you," he mouths.

It was such a good dream, leaving him breathless, but, Ben wakes up, and it's September 22nd.

And he's alone in bed, and he isn't crying, and Nate's been dead for a whole year now.

A year.

He sits up, rubbing his face with tired hands and trying to morph that fact into some shape that it makes any sense to him. Nate's been dead for a year. Two birthdays, a Christmas, an anniversary - he's missed one of each. He missed a whole year of students, he missed watching Ben get emotional watching students graduate, he missed hosting the talent show, he missed a Thanksgiving of cheap beer and sports and three different kinds of take-out on their couch.

A whole year of kisses and *I love you's*.

A summer of vacations to escape the humidity, a winter of snowball fights and hot chocolate. A fall of buying classroom supplies, a spring of Ben being stuffy and sneeze-y and making fun of him for it.

He looks over where his mind just convinced him Nate was sleeping and a deep pang in his gut tells him now would be a good time to get out of bed. He dresses mechanically, doesn't taste his coffee, doesn't go out onto the newly (very, very nearly) finished porch to drink it and remind himself to finish sealing the top.

It had only been done for a week or so, and it was nice working side-by-side with George, focusing on nothing but the proper way to measure out the planks of wood, taking careful notes inside the cooled house on what type of paint and sealant he would need.

But in the week since he hadn't seen much of him.

George patched the leak in his roof, George fixed his creaking window. It seems like every time a shingle is getting ready to fall off his roof, George appears with a box of tools and a lab barking at his heels.

Ben can't say he hates it.

Ben also can't say he hasn't slightly exaggerated the inconvenience of a squeaky floorboard as an excuse to have an afternoon be... less deathly silent. Less alone.

But this is different. He putters around the small living space for a little bit, stares at the picture that's been sitting just fine on his bookshelf for a few minutes before that lonely pain starts to fill his mind again.

He could call Anna, he's talked to her a few times in the last month or so, Caleb too - but he knows her too well. She wouldn't give him the *"I told you so,"* he probably deserves, considering she offered both to drive down to spend the weekend with him, and to have him up for the time - but it would be implied.

In every sigh, in every soft-spoken word, in every pause and silent moment.

It's been a year, he reminds himself. A year.

Should he be crying? He thinks he should be crying, he should be sobbing and dry-heaving from the grief alone.

He did it on their anniversary. On Christmas, on Nate's birthday.

Why not now?

Ben sits, staring at the screen of his phone and hovering his thumb over the well-read and well-known message log.

He doesn't click it - he knows if he does, he'll be a wreck again and maybe he should be. Maybe he should be back to where he was at the beginning, maybe he should be ruined, maybe he should be - Ben sighs before the thought can finish itself and sets the phone down, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes.

For a moment he thinks he might, his breath turns hard in his throat and he has to wheeze in a breath but it doesn't stick. The burning, the closing of his throat, it fades after a breath and Ben unfolds himself from the futon and doesn't even bother checking the weather before he walks outside, door unlocked behind him.

Down closer to the main road than Ben's house, there's a lake on George's property. He's mentioned it enough times, mentioned that Ben was more than welcome to use it whenever he wanted, mentioned it had a little dock, too.

He walks up to it, soft wind rippling the water. Ben sticks his hand in his pockets, staring it for a bit before he kicks a pebble into it, watching it sink. Down... down... down... It might hit the bottom, but it vanishes out of sight and Ben has the sudden, impulsive, desire to pick up another, bigger rock and throw that too. So he does.

And then another, and another, and another until his chest is heaving and his teeth are clenched around a scream.

He swallows it, though, and it tastes bitter.

It doesn't make him feel better at all, in fact, he feels worse. Ben's shoulders slump and he makes his way back towards the lonely little dirt road. His feet don't carry him back home, though, instead he finds his hands shoved in his pockets and - too soon - a familiar house right in his line of sight.

And it creeps closer and closer until the door is right at his feet and he's knocking, on autopilot.

George answers right as Mopsey starts barking, the dog immediately stopping when he gets a good sniff of Ben's knees.

"Ben?"

And his throat closes up instantly, swelling around the words in his throat that shrivel and die before he even has a chance to consider them as a possibility. He doesn't know why he came here, except that the idea of going home again, of being alone, of calling Anna and telling her that he lied - was too awful.

It burns like acid in his chest.

"It's been a year."

At first, Ben doesn't think he said the words himself - the voice materializing around him. It's too thin to be his own, too watery and broken and unrecognizable, and it echoes. A year. A year. A year.

At first, George says nothing. His body filling the doorway so perfectly, even as he stares - a rare openness to his gaze filled with nothing but empathy. He steps back, then, just like he did before. Just like he did that first day they met, when Ben was on the verge of tears, bleeding on his doorstep.

"Come on in."

And he does. George walks him into the living room - keeping a fair enough distance between them, and gestures for him to sit.

"Do you want something to drink?" He asks, quiet as always as Ben takes a seat on the far end of the couch. Feeling exposed, he brings one of the pillows into his lap, arms wrapping around it while he tucks his legs under himself.

Ben shakes his head and George nods and sits on the other end. There's space between them, and Ben can't help but notice. He doesn't know why he notices or why he wishes it wasn't there but he does and it just hurts. It all hurts.

George continues talking for him, "Today, then? It's been a year today?"

"Yeah, today." He sounds pathetic, he sounds like a mess. Voice cracking and everything and he doesn't snuffle but he rubs at his nose anyway, feeling it burn with the beginning of the tears that wouldn't come earlier. "It's, it's today."

He stares down at his own hands, clasped white-knuckled to each other, holding the pillow in a vice-grip against his own body, "He would be twenty-eight, you know. His birthday was in June and - and he would have just had another class of kids this year and he'd swear they were his favorite even if he said it every year."

It all comes out in a torrent, and he can feel himself almost wincing as he says it. George doesn't want to know, of course he doesn't. George didn't know him, George doesn't care - but Ben can't stop himself and George doesn't say a word to stop him.

"I don't know what's worse, being a wreck all the time or hating myself whenever I feel better because I feel like I shouldn't - and sorry, sorry, sorry, you don't need to hear this. I shouldn't have come here, fuck, George, I don't mean to -" Ben stands abruptly, dropping the pillow and startling the dog - but George is to his feet faster.

"No, no, Ben. Sit." A hand comes to his shoulder and gently guides him back down. "It's alright, I understand. I meant to," a pause, "tell you that if you wished to discuss it, I would be more than willing to listen. But finding the appropriate time, and explaining everything was difficult - though I wish I could've done so sooner."

Despite the sincerity in his voice, thick and raw and pure, Ben still resists. If only momentarily.

But he folds, sitting back down, burning under his collar from the mortification. He should leave, he shouldn't - he shouldn't have burdened George with all of this.

George doesn't need to know, he probably still doesn't want to know.

"Martha died May twenty-first," George says, outright and plain after a lingering length of silence, "she was thirty-seven, we were married for seventeen years. She had pancreatic cancer."

His face is stony, solid when Ben looks up to find him staring at his own hands - or maybe just at the gold band. His voice is steady, but in the break when he breathes in it shakes, trembling so faintly that he almost misses it.

"I'm not trying to compare pains, I would never," he assures, after a deep breath, "I am only trying to assure you that, if you want to talk to someone about him - I will understand, Benjamin, and I will never pass judgment for it."

It's soothing, comforting, and Ben feels himself relax a little against the couch - curling tighter. There's a shuffling from the floor and something warm presses against his thigh. Ben immediately reaches down to pet Mopsey, the familiar touch as grounding as George's voice is.

"If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to either," He assures, and Ben bites his lip.

"I told you his name was Nate, right?"

A nod.

"He was in a car accident, I was supposed to go with him, so I mean," and there his voice goes again, crackling and trickling out, "I know it wasn't my fault, logically, I know there was nothing I could do and there was no way I could have known but - I just think. If I hadn't taken that call, if I hadn't done this or that. If he hadn't woken up early or if I had woken up before him or just agreed to go get the goddamn coffee myself... this wouldn't have happened."

He still isn't crying, but he feels close - fingers burying into the soft fur. He pulls back as Mopsey shifts, ready to apologize, but the little lab pulls himself up onto the couch instead, filling the space between them a little awkwardly and resting his head on Ben's leg from there. It makes for a better angle and Ben starts back up again.

"They said it was fast. He was... he didn't," his mind offers up the word "suffer" but that doesn't feel right. He was alone, of course he suffered - Nate hated being alone. He surrounded himself constantly with his friends and if there wasn't one there with him he'd make fifteen new ones to compensate.

He loved people and he loved the way people loved him - despite the little clashes of jealousy it spawned.

Ben doesn't know what to say next. He can't formulate the thoughts and then turn them into words without it all feeling garbled and lost and just pathetic.

"If I may," George cuts in, one hand extending. For a moment, Ben thinks he's asking if can take his hand and his heart leaps into his throat - panic on the back of his tongue as his entire body screams *not now not now not now* .

But he doesn't. He rests his hand on the back of the couch and takes Ben's silence for approval.

"I know you hear it a lot, but I am very sorry, Benjamin. Sincerely. I know there isn't much I can say that would be a comfort - and if you would rather I be honest? That pain doesn't... leave. You won't wake up and feel better one day, Ben, you'll open your eyes and see a year has passed and it doesn't feel like any time at all."

"But it also feels like it's been so long," Ben adds on, quietly watching the steady rise and fall of Mopsey's breathing. "Like there's so much time that's gone by and I wake up and it's only been a year. Like I should still be wearing black and should still be spending every day smelling his t-shirts and crying in bed - but I'm not. I'm not, and I should be."

George pets Mopsey's flank in the silence, and Ben has the sudden, impulsive thought that if the dog weren't between them he would reach for him. It's invasive, it's wrong, Ben can tell - but he can't shake the sudden thought and he has to stand - only half-realizing that George has been talking still, just as softly and soothingly, but it all sounds like he's underwater.

He's saying something about how it'll always be hard, how Ben will always feel like he's doing the wrong thing but all the words are blurring and he can't sort them out in his mind - but soon enough, George seems to stop, his brows pinched in sudden worry.

George stands too, reaching out for him in an aborted gesture before letting his hand fall to his side. He looks almost... afraid. Panicked, in a sense, but Ben needs to be away, needs to think, needs to settle his rapid-pounding heart.

George points him through the bedroom door, towards the closest bathroom.

Everything feels blurred and Ben is standing in front of a mirror, suddenly very aware of why he was sent here. He looks more than just pale - his face gray and drained of blood, his eyes vacant and somewhat glassy.

He runs the tap, splashing some cool water on his face.

He takes a breath.

It only makes sense, he thinks, to crave some sort of physical comfort in the face of such an emotional time. It wasn't like he was thinking of crawling over the couch and kissing him, straddling his lap or anything. He was just imagining resting his head on his chest, an arm around his shoulders.

Nothing too intense, nothing too awful.

Right?

He can go out, apologize, ask for that piece of advice again, apologize for his lapse in attention.

Ben picks up a hand towel to dry his face. He pats it once, then twice... something too familiar about it. Glancing back over his shoulder, Ben presses it to his face and inhales. He knows this smell, sorta citrusy and faint but he can't place it or the distant memory it tries to awaken.

Part of him thinks he should just leave it at that and go, but that nagging feeling of needing to know won't leave. It's like that memory is lingering just out of reach and he has to, he just has to know.

George's aftershave is sitting there so innocuously, but Ben gravitates towards it, picking it up and - after once again, looking towards the door - smells it.

It all rushes back at once - the soft, slightly spicy burst of orange that Ben got whenever he pressed too close to George right after he showed up in the morning. He can recall the way it always faded as the day wore on, the way Ben would get that pang of longing whenever he caught it lingering in the back of his mind.

The dream.

The dream from the night before, pressing his face into Nate's neck and smelling *this*. It wasn't some imaginary cologne that Nate never wore, it was this, it was George. The memories are relentless, the way Nate's hands were too rough and his chest was too solid and his shoulders were too broad and his eyes - his eyes.

Nate's eyes were *brown*.

Bile churns in his gut and Ben comes very near to throwing up at the realization. He shoves the bottle back where it was, suddenly woozy and fuck going back out there, fuck going back and talking more. This was a terrible idea. An awful, terrible idea.

He's been dreaming about George, he's been dreaming about George, he's been *dreaming about George*.

It makes sense, he tries to tell himself again, it makes sense it makes sense. George is the only person he's been seeing, George is the only person he's been in real extended contact with. George is the only person close enough to him to make an imprint on his subconscious.

Besides, George is straight. He was married, he was obviously married - it makes *sense*. It has to.

It has to make sense, it has to just be some natural effect. The one person there, helping him, supporting him - maybe it's some weird complex or maybe it's just nature. He's a young guy, he's bound to have the occasional filthy dream about the people around him - and maybe it would be fine if it was just that.

But it wasn't, it isn't.

He dreamed of warm winter beds watching the snowfall with thick, strong arms around his waist. He dreamed of sharing sticky-sweet kisses. He dreamed of sucking bruises onto a neck that he has to push himself up on his tip-toes to reach. He dreamed of falling asleep on a strong chest. He dreamed a rough voice telling him he was beautiful.

He dreamed about George. His hands fist in his hair, this isn't happening, this *can't* be happening.

He all but sprints out of the bathroom, finding George still standing there, with that same look of concern and it hurts, it hurts to look at him and Ben can't. He can't. He's awful, he's terrible.

Ben was supposed to come out here to mourn, and it's *only been a year*.

It's only been a year.

A whole year.

"Ben?" God, it's that *voice*, too. Nate's hasn't rung in his ears in weeks, and when it did it was strained and muffled and wrong, like he was forgetting but George's stayed strong. "Ben, are you alright? Did something I say upset you?"

"I have to go, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, fuck, I'm sorry. I have to go," he brushes past him, eyes

burning hot with tears again.

George doesn't stop him as he flees.

Chapter End Notes

- George's Aftershave scent is based off of the Real Life George Washington's
- from the last chapter, Honey Girl is named after (one of) Ben Tallmadge's Real Life Wives

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Peach season is over, the evenings are getting colder and Ben is the biggest asshole he knows.

Chapter Notes

New Tags Associated with this chapter specifically: Homophobia, specifically in terms of implying a character may be a predator based on sexuality.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Speak what you think today in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.” -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Peach season is over, the evenings are getting colder and Ben is the biggest asshole he knows.

George had sent him a text (a rare thing coming from the man who had openly admitted to much preferring to call or email instead) just a few hours after he'd fled his living room like the whole damn thing was on fire - and Ben avoids even looking at it now. Instead he paces the length of his living room (not substantial in the least) a few hundred times and tried to reason with the disgust in his gut.

How could he? How could he fantasize about his landlord like that? He can't exactly pinpoint an exact night it started happening, when the dreams shifted substantially from Nate and begging for him to come back to Nate's body twisting under his own to George's body pressing alongside Ben's. It all blurs together, like small changes that lead up to something completely new without him ever noticing. How did he not notice? How did he not wake up with the ghost of rough hands scraping down his arms and not think that *can't be Nate* ?

How could he forget the softness of his touch, how could he forget the dimples in his grin, how could he forget the color of his eyes? Ben grinds to a halt in front of the bookcase and snatches up the photo there, just to reassure himself.

It wasn't a stellar shot for them, but Ben knows - if he thinks about it he knows, he knows Nate's eyes are brown. He never believed Ben when he told them they were gorgeous. He'd brush the compliment off, shove Ben's shoulder and tell him *yours are gorgeous-er* and then kiss him to shut him up when he insisted.

A sickness and a guilt festers in him. He's irredeemable. Ben never even considered other men when he was with Nate; maybe it was because of how long he'd spent pining after him or maybe it was because there was no one else quite like Nate but even in that stretch of three months where they were sleeping together, but not dating, Ben only had eyes for him. Now he feels filthy, like he

needs to scrub the sin from his skin. Ben was supposed to come here to pause everything, to breathe, but George just had to swoop in and press fast-forward instead.

He sets the photo back down and lets that rampant disgust light the red-alerts in the back of his brain until he can finally understand what they've been wailing since he moved here.

Ben moved here to move on. He moved here to recover and push the pain and loss right out of his life - he moved here because he wanted everything to stop. The questions, the condolences, the guilt - and now he wants... he wants... he has no idea what he wants. He wants to stop hurting, he wants to keep hurting because it means he still feels something.

He wants to forget, he wants to remember. He wants to let go, he wants to hold on, he wants to know what he's supposed to do, what he's supposed to be feeling, what he's supposed to be wanting.

And, stupidly, he stands there and he thinks of Nate. His sun-light smile, his chin on Ben's shoulder when he used to croon "Son of a Preacher Man" into his ear in a terrible southern accent. He thinks of their first-kiss, New Year's Eve, buzzed on cheap vodka in someone's apartment while everyone crowded around a TV to watch the ball drop. He thinks of how re-assuring Nate was as they stumbled down the street back towards his place together, trading kisses, touches - beaming with confetti raining down around them from someone else's party three floors up.

He thinks of that gut-clenching fear the first time he let an "*I love you*" slip, and Nate's awed and half-confused, "*what?*" in response.

He thinks of the day Nate asked him to move in with him, naked and not touching in the sweltering summer heat. Ben was hesitant, half-convinced Nate would get bored of him or annoyed if he was seeing him every day already - but Nate pointed out Ben had spent so much time at his place he'd accidentally let the plant in his windowsill die.

He thinks of every moment they had, of every time he was sick or exhausted or torn between options and Nate was always there.

Ben's still thinking about it when he crawls into bed. He's still thinking about it when he responds to Anna's text to tell her it's alright, he's okay, he did talk to somebody, don't worry about him. He's still thinking about it when he stares at George's from earlier.

Did you get home alright?

He doesn't respond, letting it fall down off his bed and onto the floor. Instead he curls his arms around a pillow.

He hates himself, he hates this house, he hates everything.

He thinks of George as he falls asleep.

Two days of sulking later, when he wakes up, his first thought is: Shit.

He didn't even thank George for listening to him babble, he didn't even offer George any sort of consolatory reason as to why he left the way he did. Not that a reason would help, he thinks bitterly to himself, in fact that might make it worse.

What could he say? *Hey, George, sorry I freaked at your place, it's just that I realized the dirty dreams I've been having recently weren't about my dead boyfriend - they were about you.*

George may be fine with Ben being gay, but that doesn't mean he wants (or needs) to know that. Really, no one wants to know when they're the subject of some gross dream and George really isn't an exception. No matter how friendly they've gotten, he can't stop reminding himself that it's wrong, thinking about his straight, widowed landlord like that. He resolves to lie the next time he sees him - despite the fact that the idea of having to see him makes him kind of queasy.

Four days after that, he convinces himself he isn't avoiding George, he's just busy.

The next day he works the market with Gilbert - he gets up at four, gets home at dusk, falls face-first into his bed.

George invites him over for dinner and they don't talk about it, Ben returns the gesture and they still don't talk about it. They sit, drinking in silence that never existed there before, the room around them crammed with elephants. George mentions it's busy this time of year, between the late squash and the pumpkins and the watermelons and apples. He mentions Gilbert is picking up new help left and right, borrowing them from a rather eccentric guy named Friedrich.

Ben mentions he helped at the last stand, and tries not to notice the way George's features shift when he tells him about the girl who brought more honey, asking how he liked the last batch, or the woman with the apples insisting he try her cider. He tries to remind himself not to think too hard about it, not to think about how badly he wants to close his eyes and make everything stop.

He pretends not to notice that George still looks at him when he looks away, like he's trying to read something in a language he's long-since forgotten.

Ben fills his week helping Gilbert and his little rag-tag staff, picking apples and quickly learning what a ripe squash looks like and how to be most efficient at it. He works himself into exhaustion nearly every night, quickly realizing that the more tired he is when he collapses into bed in a mess of aching limbs - the less likely he is to dream.

So he works himself harder, declines an offer or two of dinner from George when his sore back and arms refuse to let him move.

When there's no harvesting to be done, he ends up spending another Sunday morning counting change out with the Lafayettes and carrying crates to and from the truck. It's entertaining, at least, watching the people mill about. By the third week, he's gotten to know some regulars and he's more than a little proud. But it doesn't distract from the fact that things have changed, and Ben isn't sure how to handle it.

October's big dinner doesn't offer much in the way of help either. Alex steals George away for a stretch of time for reasons no one explains, and he's left listening to Eliza talk to Gilbert about some kid from her most recent case and how smart he is but he can't focus. He's too caught up thinking - comparing. He decided long enough ago that as long as he didn't *act* on the dreams he was fine, but that didn't mean they still didn't bother them.

There are still mornings that he wakes up achingly hard, grinding against his bed with the shadowed memories of cool eyes he now recognizes and rough hands gripping his hips and a smart, deliberate tongue on him. They come more frequently than his nightmares, but at least he's given the solace of a few nights where he can't remember whatever blur of emotion and voices haunted him through his unconscious mind.

He's taken more cold showers than hot ones, though thankfully only one night ended with him tearing the sheets off his bed and kicking his boxers into a pile of laundry like he was sixteen again. His mind betrays him and conjures up the sharpest memory from that night, rough stubble scraping under his jaw, a hand down the front of his jeans, a voice growling in his ear, asking, "*Do you like that, Benjamin?*"

Involuntarily, he shivers and tries to tame his imagination.

"Are you alright, Ben?" Eliza asks, and he realizes now there are three sets of eyes on him.

"Huh?" comes his eloquent and well-thought out response.

"You've been spacy all night, Gilbert isn't working you too hard, is he?"

He tries to blink back into focus at the current surroundings, shaking his head, "No, he hasn't. I'm just kinda tired, I guess. Sorry, about missing all that." He makes a vague gesture and Eliza spares a glance towards Adrienne that Ben is almost entirely sure is completely about him. Especially considering how the look immediately jumps to Gilbert.

"Seriously," he tacks on, "I'm fine."

No one looks particularly like they believe him, but no one presses him for further comment so he doesn't let that gnawing anxiety clamber up his throat. Instead they let the conversation shift away - melding back to a more even flow with Ben actually trying to pay attention this time. George comes back soon after, Alex following behind and looking far more at ease than he had before the two men vanished into the back.

Ben looks away immediately and hopes no one else notices.

By the time he makes it back, earlier than ever, he's exhausted in a very different fashion than he's been used to these last few weeks. He can still feel the press of their eyes and their quick glances between him and George and it weighs heavier than a day's worth of manual labor. All he wants to do is sink into his bed and close his eyes and, when he opens them again, have everything be put back the way it was before.

The next two weeks are just as busy as the last few and before Ben can blink he's taping orange cardboard cut-outs to a fold-down table while Adrienne hovers above him, tying tissue-paper ghosts to the poles that support their little tent. There's two different stacks of pumpkins, tiny and massive, a bowl of candy next to the cashbox and scale, and another table out a bit away covered in newspapers and paints.

Halloween really did sneak up on him - bringing with it sudden realization that he's been living in Virginia for over three months now. Three months. He tries to shake it off, but it isn't an insignificant amount of time - it's ninety days, almost a quarter of a year. And he hasn't even called someone out to check on his generator.

Ben would have thought the transition would have been harder, but while it wasn't seamless it also wasn't... bad. A spare glance up reminds him he probably has Gilbert and Adrienne to thank for that. They've been welcoming, friendly and great to him - and George. He has George to thank too. His eyes fixate down on the pumpkin he's working on, sticking it where it looks best and straightening up with only a little tired stiffness still in his joints.

He fixes the hay Gilbert tied to his wrists in an effort to give him a some-what decent costume ("It is Halloween, Benjamin," he had insisted through his fake vampire teeth, tugging the tie out of Ben's hair and plopping a straw hat over it, while Adrienne picked up the red paint to draw little circles on his cheeks, "Think of the children.") and examines the rest of the area. It's mostly the more familiar, local people from the market - setting up things like face-painting or bobbing for apples or little dart games for little plastic baubles.

They've got stickers and painting for that pile of tiny pumpkins and a rather adorably decorated little table. Adrienne hangs the last ghost, her Wednesday Addams costume a perfect excuse to keep her expression pinched and quiet, and Gilbert is already charming some early-arrival child with what sounds like his best impression of the Count from Sesame Street.

All-in-all, it seems like all the makings for a rare, soothing day. Not too long after Gilbert spread his cape out around him and managed to talk the kid's mother into buying a pumpkin for her daughter to paint, the crowds started rolling in. Kids dressed as superheroes and fairies and things from shows or books or movies that Ben didn't recognize all flocking up to the stand. He hands out candies and asks them questions the best he can about who they're dressed as.

It twinges once, and only once, that Nate was always better at this. Gasping loud and laying the compliments on thick and sincere and ruffling hair - always knowing what some little kid was dressed as or what someone was painting on the first go. He loved kids and kids loved him.

But he doesn't have time to wonder, he doesn't have time to let his thoughts linger on what used to be when there's another shy voice asking, *trick or treat*, at his feet, or when there's another batch of sticky-faced children holding up dollars and cradling little pumpkins against their chest while exhausted parents look on.

"Once this is over," Adrienne mutters, patting his back. Her hair's coming loose from the once-sleek braids and her eyeliner is slightly smeared, "we are going to drink at Georges and have a fire. Roast marshmallows and try not to laugh at Gilbert's scary stories."

Ben turns to tell her that he's actually enjoying himself - but she's already vanished into helping someone pick from the actual produce they have for sale still. He shrugs it off and steps out from behind the table once the rush dies down - looking to stretch his legs and mingle a little - and he's hardly made it two steps away when a sneering voice cuts slightly above the chatter.

"What are you supposed to be?" It's pretty thickly accented, more so than some of the other locals, and it takes Ben a second to realize the guy is talking to him.

Ben looks down at himself and then back up to the guy who either isn't wearing a costume or decided to come dressed in enough camouflage to be dressed like a bush, "Uh. I'm a scarecrow? Last minute, I know but it's whatever." He gives a little wave, "I'm Ben, by the way."

He doesn't get a name in response, but the guy casts his eyes up and down Ben in a way that makes him feel wholly uncomfortable. He takes a step back, suddenly aware of the tension. Whoever this guy is, his friends crowd up by his shoulders - taking his lead and it's a sudden shift that Ben recognizes.

He doesn't panic like he used to - he doesn't look down at himself and ask what gave it away (the clothes, the hair, the walk, or does it just roll off him?), he squares his shoulders and sets his jaw and waits.

"We've heard quite a bit about you. You're the new guy livin' up on Washington's property, right?" He asks - but it sounds far more like an accusation than a question and Ben is far certain

that he doesn't like what his tone seems to be insinuating.

"Yeah, for three months now."

The chatter behind him has faded, Ben takes a quick glance to see most of the lingering kids have shuffled off and Gilbert and Adrienne are watching with twin intent and angry stares. Not directed at Ben - but at this man instead.

"Bradford," Gilbert snaps - in a tone far sharper than Ben's ever heard from him, "leave."

"I'm just makin' conversation," the guy - Bradford, apparently - says back, his friends chuckle like he's just made some joke, "we were wonderin' if Ol' Georgie would ever scrounge himself up another prettyboy. Looks like he reeled one in just fine."

Ben can't tell if the sudden flare of hot rage is from himself or Gilbert, igniting and burning and this time, there's no voice echoing in the back of Ben's mind telling him to *be nice*. The back of his tongue tastes like the iron and copper of every drunken brawl and fist-fight he's been in over this. In Setauket, in New Haven, at Yale - now here. Bradford saunters up, his lip curling in disgust as Ben grits his teeth.

"He seems a little older than what he usually hides up in that backwater shithole of his."

"I'm only going to say it one more time, take your friends and go." There's nothing left of the kindness that used to lace Gilbert's voice. It's hard and stern and commanding in an entirely new way.

When Ben looks back at him, he looks coiled, like he's one more word away from lashing out like a viper - and his wife isn't doing a thing to stop him, her fists clenched at her sides.

Bradford sneers, looking Ben up and down one last time, "Always knew he was a perv."

It isn't until Bradford hits the ground and an audience of eyes all fixate on Ben, with his knuckles throbbing, that he thinks maybe he shouldn't have done that.

Chapter End Notes

Comments/Kudos fuel me, so leave them if you want! Or talk to me on [tumblr](#)

Or Both

Both works too

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Revelations are made and Benjamin remembers one of the specific downsides of hitting a man with a closed fist.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I am suffocated and lost when I have not the bright feeling of progression." -- Margaret Fuller

It only occurs to Ben, sitting on a comfortably worn dining room chair, that he's never seen the inside of the Lafayette's home before. It's smaller than it appears from the outside - nestled between trees - but warm. Filled with varying knick-knacks and things accumulated over the years.

There is a considerable amount of things with American flags on them, he noticed, and as if to answer some silent question, Adrienne only says, "Gilbert," by way of explanation. She sits him down, leaving him to only glance around a bit before she returns with a bag of ice wrapped in a hand towel. Silently, Ben offers her his hand. She's gentle, pressing it lightly to knuckles that he knows are going to bruise, not chastising him for lashing out or mishandling his own temper.

Gilbert had gone directly into the bedroom as soon as they got there, already pressing his phone to his ear.

"Don't worry," he had sighed as they drove back, his fingers clenched around the steering wheel. *"He had it coming, you wouldn't be the first person to punch William Bradford."*

All Ben could pick up was quiet mumbling from the other side of the door. He opens his mouth to apologize to Adrienne, for... all of it, for losing his temper, for being an ass, for ruining the evening, for embarrassing them in front of half the town - but she cuts him off with her own sigh.

"You are going to say you are sorry, but you do not need to. Hold this." She taps the ice pack as she stands up, retreating back into the kitchen.

The collection of decorations is far more eclectic, a few photos propped up on the mantle or hung up on walls, a pair of mounted pistols, a few wooden signs with phrases in French that Ben mouths to himself, trying to remember what they mean. Gilbert returns shortly before Adrienne does, still talking in hushed tones on the phone.

"No, he is fine," He says, looking up at Ben quickly as he grabs his keys from where he'd dropped them. Ben breathes a sigh of relief - he didn't want to seriously hurt him - at least, now that he's calmed down a bit he doesn't - and Gilbert continues with the other person, "you do not need to. I only thought - yes, well... no."

Gilbert's shoulders sag, and Ben's worry spikes, "I'm going to put the stuff back, Adrienne and Benjamin are here. I said, George, he is fine. He bruised his fist, nothing more."

Now he's confused. Ben's brow furrows slightly as Gilbert hangs up and Adrienne reappears, setting a mug down at Ben's elbow with a quiet command of *drink*.

"Well?" She asks, directing the question towards her husband - who sighs and lets his head hang back for a moment.

"George is on his way, I am going to clear out the truck - and then we are all going to get very, very drunk."

"Gilbert, wait," Ben cuts in - half surprised his voice still works at all, "is he alright? Bradford, I mean. He's a dick but, you know."

"You only knocked him on his ass, Benjamin, he is fine. Though uh," his gaze turns wary for a moment and he shifts a bit, "I would avoid going into town for a few days. His friends can take far more blows than he can - and if you wound his pride, you would theirs."

"What was he talking about?"

"Bradford? He runs his mouth, it is what he does." Gilbert ends that with a shrug and departs, telling them he'd be back shortly and reminding the both of them that George would be over soon enough.

Ben presses the bag against his knuckles a little harder, earning a hiss and a soft throb of pain. Adrienne sits across from him, her braids finger-combed out into long, loose waves and her expression looking far more tired than blank.

"I'm still sorry," Ben says - and she cracks just the faintest edge of a smile.

"He deserved it. Had you not, Gilbert would have. If he had not, I would have," she says it so simply, but Ben can't help but still be sorry.

"He called George a pervert. When he talked about... other boys it was like he insinuated that he and Gilbert - ah, you know - when he was younger," it comes out far more incredulous than Ben would have intended - but he still can't quite believe anyone would think that. As far as Ben knows, George would never. He doesn't leave his farm, doesn't say a mean word about anyone in the town and yet Bradford spewed the most vile of thoughts like it was nothing.

We've heard quite a bit about you.

It all haunts Ben - the sickening realization that if he wanted bigotry and gossip and people talking about him like he wasn't even there, he probably could have just gone home.

Adrienne examines her fingers, her own mug of tea, and Ben's knuckles in a slow order rather unlike her, before she starts, "I have not lived here long, but I do know no matter where you are - small towns breed rumors and I do know they are not true. People can be cruel, for no other reason than to be cruel, or to alleviate boredom." She pulls the mug back into Ben's line of sight, "It's tea, it will help you relax. If you want to know more about all that talk, you will have to ask George."

The idea makes Ben feel a little sick, to be honest. He doesn't want to dredge up any more bad memories for him, but at the same time he doesn't want there to be another thing on the list of Stuff They Don't Talk About. He stays quiet, and Adrienne seems like she's more than willing to let the silence remain - but it breaks shortly after.

"He will be here soon, though you two have been... distant, no?"

Ben's hand is aching in time with the twist in his gut. He really doesn't want to talk about this either - doesn't want to explain himself, doesn't want to bat away questions about why he's opted to let their friendship fall away. But even with his weary, tired glance up, she doesn't refrain - dark eyes smart and knowing just like the first day they met.

"We have all noticed, even Gilbert, which says more than you think. I do not pretend to understand your circumstance." Ben cringes at that - she doesn't know about Nate, there's no way she could.

"But, I do know you cannot avoid it - or him - forever without making yourself miserable. You must, ah - what is the phrase? To, ah, chew the ah..." She waves her hand, dismissing the idiom, "You must simply do it, even if it is hard."

"Do you mean bite the bullet?"

She fixes him with an unamused stare, rolling her eyes once in a fashion that Ben's gotten used to seeing as a sort of fondness before she says, "You see what I mean, though?"

He does, he doesn't want to, but he does. The idea, still, of admitting what he's been thinking to George makes him queasy but... she's right. He can't avoid him forever, he can't avoid the topic - he just also can't ever find the right time. He considers talking to Adrienne more about it, but the idea is nulled for him when the distant ringing of a familiar bark alerts them both to George's impending arrival.

Adrienne opens the door and kneels down immediately when Mopsey bursts through the door first - directly into her arms. George steps into the house with a soft greeting to Adrienne but his eyes are casting almost wildly about - only settling once they find Ben. He crosses the room quickly, and once he gets closer Ben can see more the echos of panic in his expression.

Somewhere in the background, Ben thinks he hears Adrienne talking to Mopsey, "*Let's go outside, see if there are any squirrels for you to chase.*" But he's far too focused on George to really notice.

"Are you alright?" He asks, hands reaching out but falling back down to his side in the same aborted gesture he's made so many times, "Gilbert told me you were in a fight with William Bradford."

There goes his heart again, George pulls a chair around to sit closer to Ben, hesitantly offering his hand out again - palm up, questioning. Ben gently places his injured hand in the center of it, letting George pluck the ice off to inspect. Warmth seeps through into the chilled skin, through his hand and around his wrist - slinking and wrapping and enclosing him up to the shoulder and towards his neck.

"I'm fine," he says, belatedly, "he didn't even get a swing at me, so it wasn't much of a fight. I've been in far worse at bars, where people actually get a blow or two in."

That was the wrong thing to say, Ben realizes, as George shoots him a look that's part-worried, part-surprised and he tries to backpedal himself out of that corner, "I mean, I didn't - I don't - fight a lot. I've usually got a better hold on my temper than that but Bradford was just - shit -" He winces as he tenses his hand in George's grip, the man's second hand joining the first to keep him from doing that again.

"I've known him since he was a child, he's always been as caustic as his parents. Their rumors are nothing more than that, rumors - and by now, no one believes a word they say. I'm sorry you had to deal with him, though, he is a rather awful man. Gilbert and Alexander have very much experience with that, unfortunately" There's a hardness to George's voice, it isn't sharp and biting

like Gilbert's was at the height of the tension, it's more soothing in its own way, protective.

"He said he was told about me," Ben admits after a long moment of contemplation. He already knows it means exactly what he thinks it means - or maybe it doesn't and he's only reaching into the potentials of his own paranoia, but he can't help but feel eyes on him even now, even hidden away in his friend's house.

George's thumb swipes reassuringly along the back of Ben's hand and Ben realizes quite suddenly that he hasn't let go yet. And it seems so does George - as soon as Ben looks down, he clears his throat and drops his hand back down onto the table.

"How about I walk you home, Ben?" George asks rather suddenly, instead of responding to the comment before. He stands up and glances back to the still-propped open door, "I'll tell Gilbert to just stay where he is, I'll talk to him later."

"You don't have to do that, that's probably more important," Ben quickly inputs, though his brain screams for George to do it anyway, to walk him home with the daylight twinkling out into dusk and assure him that he isn't upset at Ben at all. Even if Ben's been avoiding him so clearly.

Ben sets the ice aside, flexing his fingers a little despite the soreness and stiffness, and stands. George follows suit - quickly ducking out to tell Adrienne of his decision, and Ben peeks out to see her locked in a vicious game of tug-of-war over a stick.

"He'll follow us when he's done," George says rather plainly, once he notices Ben close at his side with a slightly amused expression. They walk around the house - closer towards the path that cuts through the trees instead of taking the path by the road around them. It's a shorter distance, George assures him, and far more private. Ben's chest agrees with his stomach that it's time to twist and churn when he says *private*.

But it doesn't mean anything. Nothing at all, he tells himself, as they walk in silence through the dark overhang, George's hands in his pockets, Ben's arms crossed over his chest.

It's tense, that much is certain - in a way that it wasn't before and Ben opens his mouth to break the suffocating silence once or twice but the words won't cough up at all so instead he falls back into their quiet rhythm. George's strides are longer, but slow enough for Ben to keep pace without having to run up beside him.

They approach the farmhouse, slowly meandering past it in silence that is slowly getting more and more prominent. It's all Ben can feel, can hear, can think about - all the things they're refusing to talk about dissolving him like acid. He takes a sharp breath to start, totally unsure of where he's going with it - but he's beaten to the punch yet again: "Gilbert told me what William suggested, and I just wanted to assure you that it isn't true. Gilbert and Alexander are - despite the lack of blood relation - my family."

"I didn't think it was true at all. That's why I hit him."

George makes an amused, if not sad, sort of sound, and continues with the silence. But now that it's been cracked, Ben can't let it linger like that. So instead, he takes another deep breathe and figures it's as good a time as any to clamp his teeth down around that bullet.

"You're a good guy, George, and I'm sorry I've been a douche recently."

"You haven't," he assures, but Ben shakes his head and powers through his confession.

"No, I have. I never even thanked you for listening to me that day, I took off and didn't give you a

reason and then I've been... sorta... well - I never explained why."

"You don't have to, Ben, I know it can be hard discussing loved ones like that. I shouldn't have pressured you into discussing Nate if you didn't want to, it was my mistake and I apologize. Sincerely."

Ben stops in his tracks, his own house closer than he would've thought it'd be by now, and groans - a frustrated noise that makes George's brow raise, "You didn't, I *promise*, I wanted to talk about it - him. I needed to and I'm so thankful that you let me and you weren't like every other person I tried to talk to it about, and you made it bearable but - it's just... I can't do," he paused to gesture vaguely, "this."

"Talking?"

"No - yeah, but no. George I," he breathes in through his nose, half-suddenly stopping the flow of words before he reached his point. He wants to clam up and turn tail and slam the door behind him - but he can't. He needs to, he has to, just spit it out, Ben, just get it over with. Maybe he'll understand, maybe he won't - but either way, he knows it'll be best just to say it.

"George, I like you. Too much, and I understand that it's probably just some knee-jerk reaction and nothing'll probably come of it but that's why I left, that's why I've been hiding with Gil and the workers. I like you and that it... scares me." He meant to say it with his chin high up in the air, stern and steadfast and full of confidence but it comes out feeble and weak and his eyes fixate on a trampled dandelion bud instead.

He snuffles and tries to hold back the shameful, embarrassed tears that well up, but something warm and solid presses so gently against his cheek and swipes at the stray one that trails down his cheek. Slowly, he looks up, instinctively pressing into George's hand.

George looks at him with unabashed and unhidden affection - and it's like a fog lifts at once and the sunshine breaks through the clouds to shine right onto what Ben's been missing. Oh, he thinks, quietly - and maybe he says it, since his lips feel like they're moving but there's nothing in his ears but the rushing roar of blood. Oh. George takes half a step closer, and Ben's fingertips find his biceps to hold him there, to hold him steady and he's so *real* under his touch. More so than Ben could have ever imagined.

He's there and he's real and he's warm and Ben very, very, *very* nearly pulls himself up to his toes, and kisses him there.

But George just strokes across his cheekbone, thumbs under his eye and whispers his name so quietly and tenderly that Ben thinks he might just sink into the abyss right then and there.

"Benjamin," he says, pulling back, "only you can decide when you're ready. Take your time, you don't want to rush into things. If this is just a proximity reaction you want to know before you make any decision."

The hand leaves his face and Ben wants to chase it, grab it and pull it back but his hands fall to his sides, numb and useless.

"Goodnight," George says as he steps back - the hesitation evident in each step back he takes and the way his eyes refuse to tear away from Ben even as he stands, confused and shocked.

He watches him leave, whispering a quiet, "Goodnight," to the empty space around him.

Chapter End Notes

Like... whole things are happening. Whole. Actual. Things.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

December is unforgiving.

Snow beats down on the tiny, unprepared little house with a rage that Ben didn't think was possible from the skies. Sure, it snowed a crap ton in Connecticut but he was used to city streets and snow-blowers and salted sidewalks and he's pretty sure if he opens his window from the loft, he'll be eye-level with the built-up drifts around him.

Chapter Notes

The Rating Has Changed: M > E

"That grand old poem called Winter" -- Henry David Thoreau

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Here, he had stayed up late watching it come down in sheets - obscuring even the closest knot of dying trees with nothing but white. No distant glowing lights to cut through, only the flickering of power that he prayed would stay on.

Fingers curled around a warm mug of cocoa, the fire slowly dwindling down from his last chunks of wood that he'd actually brought inside. He put it out to sleep, trying to ignore the way the chill seeped into his bones as he curled up under a pile of blankets and tried to let his heater catch up with the cold.

He doesn't know when he falls asleep - but he knows when he wakes up he's shivering. Even under the layers upon layers - cold seeps through the cracks and forces itself up against his skin and up through flannel pajama pants and the t-shirt he'd fallen asleep in.

Ben rubs his arms to try to get some warmth for himself as he pads out of bed and to his phone to check the time. He tries to click it on, but nothing happens.

He pauses, and then tries again.

It was almost dead when he'd plugged it in last night, but it's on its charger, it should be fine. He sighs as he leans down farther, dragging his duvet with him to wiggle it in its outlet - unplug and

re-plug it back in but nothing happens. It's a new charger too, his old one had been cutting out and he replaced it just in case. He tries another outlet with the same result.

Ben's thoughts catch up to him and a bolt of fear spears his gut. He never got the generator checked, it was giving him trouble through rainstorms and whenever he tried to use too much power before but he didn't think it would break down. It can't break down, the roads are thick with snow and the outside is nothing but a blur of white and - fuck - he can't even call someone about this.

And if his fear is true, that means... Oh no.

No, no, no. He scrambles down the latter, flinching when his feet touch the ice-cold wood and tries every light in the house.

"Fuck," he whispers, even colder now that he's slid down from his bed, "fuck fuck *fuck*."

How could he be so stupid? How could he forget, he kept reminding himself to call someone - George kept reminding him to call someone. Get it checked out, make sure it's running well for winter but time just rushed past him and it slipped through the cracks of his mind while the rest of the space was just filled with *George*.

They didn't talk about Halloween. They talked about other things, but it was enough. Sitting together on his couch with a dog between them and a cup of coffee in his hand too early in the morning, talking about Alexander and Eliza's engagement announcement that they made at Thanksgiving. Poking fun at how much Gilbert loved the very painfully American holiday. They talked about crop rotations and ideas and Ben brought up planting his own little garden and that meaningful look from the day Ben first mentioned it returned.

Only that time he could read it. It was a mixed sort of awe and affection and shock, landing in the general vicinity of comfortably happy.

He had asked about it, and George had responded candidly, "You didn't strike me as the gardening type."

"What, I look like I don't like getting dirty?"

"You looked like you weren't up to tending to living things."

"Oh."

Ben had wanted to scootch over, rest his head on George's shoulder and just relax there. But he didn't.

The seasons had melted together, fall into winter and Ben hardly noticed with George. He let everything fade into the background and it just felt so... right. He picked his sweaters out of a box in his closet and replaced them with all his cargo shorts, eventually got out all his knit gloves and hats and scarves and started to keep warm.

Warm. Fuck, he shivers again and drags a thick blanket from his futon to wrap around his shoulders as he pads around trying to figure out what to do.

Jesus what he wouldn't give for more firewood right now. Or power. The wind howls and his windowpanes rattle and Ben is stuck momentarily by an idea - it's a bad idea, a terrible idea but he has it. He has it and he can't shake it, but he isn't sure what sort of state he's going to be in come morning. If it's not morning already.

He knows it's his only option if he doesn't want to turn into an icicle, and the panic is already setting in enough to make him go over the signs of hypothermia and frostbite in his mind over and over and over again.

He pulls on jeans over his flannels, layering a jacket over his shirt and two scarves around his nose and mouth. A hat, ear-muffs, gloves. He's layered thick and he already knows it won't be enough - but he's only got the one option.

Ben starts out and the cold knocks his breath from him immediately. It burns his mouth and his nose and *hurts* deep, deep into his lungs. Only choice, he tells himself.

He has to.

It'll only get colder in his house, he won't be able to call for help if something happens, he won't be able to do anything. He won't even be able to call for a repairman to fix his generator in the morning, won't be able to call George. His fingers stiffen in his snow-drenched gloves by the time he's halfway there. Trudging through snow that's too high and against wind that's too cold and he only trips once. Stumbling over a rock, he ends up covered up to the waist.

The farmhouse looks so far away, but so close all at once.

Ben doesn't know how he does it. But he's drawn to George's - caught in the pull and somehow, somehow, he makes it.

His legs feel detached and numb, his fingers, nose, cheeks, toes all burn as he tries to form a fist to knock at George's door. When his hand refuses to cooperate he just hits it, a belated thought mingling through the fog that overwhelms him. What if he can't wake up George? What if he just ends up curled there on his porch come morning, frozen and breathless and - not for the first time - a spike of fear bursts through him.

Somewhere in the distance, there's a sound. Sharp and echoing, familiar and unique at once. Ben hasn't heard Mopsey sound this panicked, his bark ceaseless - fading and rising through the howling wind surrounding him.

Ben's convinced, in a moment, that nothing will ever be as sweet as the relief that floods through him when, just at the edge of his sight, a light flickers on in a window.

He could sob, he could collapse down to his knees if his entire body wasn't locked with a chill that freezes him in place. If his jaw wasn't wired so tightly shut against the chattering of his teeth - he would grin. Lights trail on in the house and Ben's mind clicks that that means electricity.

Power.

Heat.

All the way until the door to salvation creaks open and there, silhouetted in the frame, is Ben's very confused savior. George takes pause for a moment, his brow knitting together. Ben can't even open his mouth to explain - or if he does manage to part his lips, nothing but freezing air comes up from his lungs. The silhouette moves, and George wraps an arm around Ben's shoulder - guiding him inside.

The warmth is the first thing he registers, a burning sort of heat that sears his cheeks in comparison to the chill that overcomes the rest of him. He's walked through the house - distantly conscious of the fact that he's tracking dirt and mud and snow and ice through the living room and bedroom and into the master bathroom.

There are hands at his chest and Ben's confused, for just a moment, before his soaked jacket is pushed from his shoulders and strong, solid hands come to rest on Ben's arms.

"It's okay," George rumbles, and Ben has the distinct impression that this isn't the first time he's said it, but he can't quite focus on it. The solid touch tells Ben that he's been shivering almost violently, every muscle in his body too-tense and too-tight as his body tries to conserve what little heat it had.

Ben tries to say something again, only managing a half-croaked, "Generator," after a few wayward attempts.

George hushes him, fingers already working on peeling Ben's gloves away from his numb hands. The sight of the bright crimson skin underneath makes Ben wince, and two hands take up the first of Ben's - enclosing around them and rubbing slowly.

"I figured," says George after a moment. "I'm sorry, Benjamin, I should have had it examined long before you moved in or hired someone myself." He repeats the gesture to Ben's other hand, not quite soothing away the tremors yet. Ben takes it upon himself to unwind his own scarf, even as George kneels down to unlace Ben's boots - his eyes remaining stiffly on the task at hand.

The traitorous part of Ben's mind reminds him that this isn't the way Ben thought this would happen: George's hands stripping away his clothing layer by layer, as if it wasn't a dream that he'd had on repeat or a fantasy he drew up in the steam of his shower with his hand on himself. In this mind there was far less pain. And far more kissing.

But for all that that thought excites Ben, he fears it just as much. He's aware still, distantly, that this is wrong in so many ways, despite what George had thought and said.

Wrong as George helps him out of his boots. Wrong as George thumbs along the hem of Ben's still-wet and still-freezing undershirt. Wrong as he immediately retreats. George clears his throat, and Ben looks down to notice the pile of wet clothes slumped on the tile.

"You should get out of those," George half-mumbles as he steps back quickly, averting his eyes and turning to rifle through a cabinet next to the sink. "You can just dry off or, well, after being out in the cold for a while, I prefer to take a warm bath. It's up to you."

Ben's knees are still knocking and he glances towards the spacious tub along the other wall of George's bathroom. His fingers toy with the hem of his shirt and - as the space around them heats - its wet sticking gets significantly more uncomfortable. Same with his freezing jeans and his soaked pajamas underneath them and the mud that's clinging to him from tripping in the snow.

He can't deny how appealing the thought is and he nods, after a moment, belatedly adding to his response, "that sounds great, actually. Thank you." Ben's voice only trembles faintly - distantly. "I'm going to - uh. Get these off. Better sooner, right?"

"Right. I'll start it, the knobs can be difficult without practice."

There's another tense pause and Ben doesn't know if it'd be weirder to stand there wet and cold and stiff fiddling with his shirt or to just strip the heavy fabric off with George setting the towel down on the edge of the bath. He breathes and goes for it - George's entire posture tensing momentarily when the wet slap of his shirt falling to the tile echoes far too loud in the little room.

He catches his reflection, and he's mottled with pink and red spots - along his ribs and stomach and flushed deep at his chest. Finding it cold to the touch, he rubs a little awkwardly at his chest for a

few moments with still uncooperative fingers before George straightens, content with the water running and sloshing, and averts his eyes politely away from Ben's half-naked body.

"I'll be just in the other room if you need me," he assures and - with a click of the door behind him - vanishes. Ben's heart races and he fumbles with his fly - fingers still too stiff to do much - but gets it done before too long. A glance over his shoulder double-checks the door before he slips his boxers down as well, feeling slightly exposed in George's home.

George's home.

He steps out of the pile of clothes, towards the bath. He's naked in George's house. In George's bathroom. His heart beats too hard in his chest and he hurries to shut off the water and slip into the refreshing warmth. He resolves not to think about it for a second longer and instead relaxes down into the water. It's not too hot, it's just enough that it seeps into his skin and curls around him. The bath was clearly made with someone of George's proportions in mind - tall and broad-shouldered.

It engulfs Ben and he rests his cheek against the cool side curling his arms around himself, trying to shake that jarring realization he'd had earlier as George's works haunt him.

"I'll be just in the other room."

Despite the heat, Ben shivers once more. George is hardly two doors away - perhaps he is in his bedroom, even closer. Or the living room, where Ben knows there's only a wall and some insulation that's separating them now. George is right there. Close and real and warm and if Ben shuts his eyes - he can too easily see him coming through that bathroom door, sinking his fingers into his hair and kissing him breathless.

Stripping down, sinking into the water with Ben and touching him, feeling him. Fingers moving sluggishly through the water to circle around Ben's cock, stroking him in time with languid, lazy kisses.

He doesn't know how long he stays there, eyes shut against the side of the bath and fantasy running forward - but by the time he's startled back into full-wakefulness, he's half-hard and the lingering thought of George's fingers pressing deep inside him and his tongue swiping the head of his cock is still fuzzing around his head

Ben shakes the tendrils of the image from his head as he sits up straighter - water sloshing as he tries to pinpoint the source of the sound that woke him. It comes again shortly thereafter. A knock, soft and just loud enough to hear, followed this time by a voice.

"Do you need anything, Ben?"

His blood goes cold and his toes curl against the slick bottom of the tub. Jesus, George is right there. A breath away, a moment away and Ben could say no. He could say no, he could send him away or - or he could be very quiet. Very, very quiet and pretend he didn't hear and George could turn the knob and let the door swing open, and... and....

"Thanks, I'm good. I'm just about warm enough, I think."

George continues through the door. "I've left some dry clothes out here for you. They might be a little big, but they're warm. I'll be in the living room."

Ben hurries out of the bath and pulls the drain and starts to dry himself quickly. Already the chill is seeping back into his limbs, the steam of the now-cooled water long gone. Just in case, he wraps the towel around his waist as he ducks his head out to find a pile of clothing folded with a neat,

military efficiency. Drawstring sweatpants and a plain long-sleeved shirt.

He notices quickly that his own boxers were soaked and are still not only wet but *freezing*.

There aren't many things he can do. He pulls on the pants, tightening the string around his hips and trying to ignore the fact that he's going commando in George's clothes. He wrings out his wet clothes over the tub and gathers them together as best he can and uses the towel to sop up some of the melted snow from the floor.

George is sitting on the edge of the couch when Ben pads out. He stands quickly, reaching a hand out and offering to take Ben's clothes over to the laundry room.

"Sit, I made you tea - it should still be warm."

Ben notices that even the fire is going - something else George must've done while Ben was in the bath. It pops and cracks contentedly, and Ben looks back towards the couch - it's been fitted with a sheet, a couple blankets folded up on the end and a small pile of pillows on the other. It makes something in his chest hurt in that same guilty fashion. Both mugs on the coffee table are steaming slightly, though one is nearly a quarter gone and Ben assumes it's George's and takes the other.

George comes back right as Ben sits neatly on the edge, tea in his hands.

"I would offer you one of the other bedrooms, but they haven't been prepared well for winter. They don't get any heat, and I thought if you were still cold the fire would be best."

"It's great, perfect, you didn't have to do all this. Just letting me in was fine enough."

George twists his features into another unreadable expression and he sits there beside Ben. "I am not going to let you freeze."

"Thank you," he says anyway, and George offers him one of his lovely, rare smiles in return. They sit like that for god knows how long, Mopsey giving Ben a thorough sniffing as if to confirm that he's alright. Ben scratches his head and tells him he's fine, only to be rewarded with some thorough and wet cheek-licks. They talk, and talk. About nothing and everything - about how Gilbert once decorated up his little house in far too many lights and the only neighbor they had for miles showed up to complain once. Eventually, Ben finds himself leaning against George - drinking in his heat and solidity with a thick blanket of exhaustion pressing against his shoulders.

He leans his head on him, humming in acknowledgment of whatever it is George has said. He doesn't know, his mind fades back to the sort of half-dream he'd had in the bath - but this time with far less sex and kissing and hands on his shoulders guiding him back down to the couch. Fingers brushing back his hair and a thumb swiping over his temple. A blanket pulled over him, something warm at his feet getting up and then curling itself back down.

It's a good dream, he thinks, nuzzling down into a pillow that smells just faintly of citrus and spice. A very, very good dream.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

It feels strangely right. Ben knows he should feel more out of place, more awkward and unsure every moment he spends in George's house - but it's too comfortable, too warm and too nice. He feels like they slot together so well - and sometimes it shows, painful evident in ways that Ben can't just ignore. It would be too easy, too simple for Ben to just shift the way his legs are tucked under himself and fit right under George's arm and press his cheek against his collar. He could curl up next to him, in this same quaint silence and just sit there with him.

And he'd be happy to, too.

"Go confidently in the way of your dreams! Live the life you imagined." - Henry David Thoreau

George's kitchen is well stocked for the snowstorm - clearly he'd either been increasing Gilbert's grocery runs or just had one done. Ben already knows how rare it is for anyone to be up before George is - but he did wake up him at (he would later learn) a little after three in the morning and then kept him up for God-only-knows how long.

He had himself been woken up not too long ago by a tongue on his cheek, two paws on his chest, a weight on his stomach and an upset whimper that Ben's learned means Mopsey needs to go out. He'd gotten up and done just that - waiting with a towel for when he darts back in far more white than brown.

Maybe he shouldn't feel so easily at home in a house that isn't his, but it's harder to pretend like he isn't when it comes to finding Mopsey's food and filling his water bowl. He knows how George takes his coffee so he starts that - figuring he might as well do something nice for George since he'd leaned on him so heavily recently. While the coffee brews, Ben fishes eggs and bacon from the fridge and starts on that.

He makes toast to go with it, too, finding a jar of that jam that George had said was his favorite just a couple months ago.

Mopsey sticks to Ben's heels the entire time, wagging his tail and begging at Ben's sympathetic side for bits of bacon. He's pushing the bacon around to give it that near-burned crispiness that George likes best when his four-legged shadow disappears. Ben glances back over his shoulder to where the kitchen archway has been filled by a shuffling George. Mopsey twists around his ankles as George blinks the sleep out of his eyes.

Ben drinks the sight in a little more than he should. His hair is sticking up at every angle, he's got a thicker stubble speckled through with grays, and there's an imprint under his eye from what was probably the seam of his pillow. When blinking doesn't work, George rubs at his face with his fist - fading down some of the sleep-warm pinkness from his cheeks.

“You made breakfast?” Even his voice is thick with sleep - heavy and slow and needle-pricked with some short little awe.

“I hope you don’t mind, it’s a thank you for not letting me freeze to death on your porch and an apology for waking you up last night.”

George waves it off and steps around Mopsey in order to get at the two mugs sitting in front of the coffee pot - already filled with everything they like in them, only waiting for coffee to be poured fresh and hot. A warm hand comes to rest just slightly on the base of Ben’s back as George shifts behind him to lean in and grab one. He stiffens and then relaxes, his breath freezing in his lungs at just the little, innocuous gesture meant only, *only*, to keep them from bumping into each other.

“It smells amazing, Ben,” George says - a little too close to his ear - as he backs up with the two handles his hand and returns for the pot soon after, “would you like a cup of coffee?”

“I’d love one.” It takes Ben a couple breaths to get that said, but he manages and pulls the pan from the stove - depositing the bacon onto a paper-towel to drain. He hisses when the heat gets too bad and presses his thumb to his mouth, grumbling a bit as he turns back from the stove.

George looks up, brow furrowed, from where he’s pouring the coffee and asks, “You alright?”

“Yeah.” he waves his hand a bit, pressing it back to his mouth for a second after, “just got myself a little.”

It’s just because of the injury, Ben tells himself, and how protective George is over everyone that his eyes flicker down to his lips and he snaps his gaze away immediately. Clearing his throat, George nudges the mug towards Ben and they move in a little circle around one another. Ben going back for the coffee as George moves towards the food.

Ben gets silverware while George grabs plates for them - a careful, silent sort of dance that ends with them both at the table - Mopsey panting hot on Ben’s knee and staring intently at every fork-full of food. They eat in relative silence, George occasionally telling Ben how good some aspect of it is, thanking him again for making breakfast and coffee and taking care of Mopsey.

“It’s no problem,” Ben insists, picking slightly at his eggs to avoid looking up and showing the way his face reddens slightly at the comment, “though, uh, would you mind if I borrowed your phone later? I need to call someone out to fix the generator and I left mine at home last night.”

“It’s not a problem, but I don’t think anyone can come today. The side roads need to be cleared first - and I believe we’re expecting another snowfall today.”

Ben’s gut churns. Of course - he’s already dreading the idea of going back out into the cold but George speaks up again to that, “You’re more than welcome to stay until it clears and someone can come fix it. I can open the vents for the second bedroom so you can sleep in bed. I know the couch isn’t the best of arrangements but it was much warmer last night.”

He opens his mouth to say - something, to tell him he doesn’t need to do this, to tell him the couch was actually really comfortable, to say something, but he stops instead and smiles, “Thanks. It means a lot. I can, uh, I can run - more like trudge - back to my place and grab some clothes, though. I’m sure you’re gonna watch your pants back eventually.”

Ben tries to laugh it off - and he did catch sight of himself when he put on George’s clothes last night. He was swimming in them - sleeves well past his fingertips, cuffs rolled up to his ankles. But George shakes his head, “I don’t mind, if you’d like to I can offer you some warmer clothes to

make it there. Your jacket needs to dry still, and I can dry your other clothes today.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. Thanks, again. You really don’t have to do all of this.”

George pauses, swallowing a mouthful of coffee. “I don’t see why I would kick you out into the snow with no heat, but alright.”

Okay maybe Ben can’t quite argue with that - so he doesn’t. He waits until George isn’t looking before he sneaks Mopsey a strip of bacon and some toast under the table and the pair start clearing dishes. They work side-by-side, George rinsing while Ben dries, and in a quiet sort of contemplation. Ben points out how high the snow got - the thick drifts where Mopsey had gotten a little over-excited about his second-ever snowfall and tried to dart around.

George huffs that little reserved laugh again and refreshes their coffee to take to the couch instead. Ben only spares a glance at the clock - which tells him it’s nearly ten already. Talk fizzles out into a comfortable silence, Ben idly watching the beginnings of little flurries start to tumble down while, beside him, George busies himself writing something down in a notebook - some sort of list that Ben doesn’t pry into. He just leans his hand down and let’s a snuffle alert him he’s about to get licked before he goes into sink his fingers into the soft fur. They sit like that in quiet for a bit - Ben pulls the blanket from the night before over his shoulders at one point to ward away any lingering coldness.

It feels strangely right. Ben knows he should feel more out of place, more awkward and unsure every moment he spends in George’s house - but it’s too comfortable, too warm and too nice. He feels like they slot together so well - and sometimes it shows, painful evident in ways that Ben can’t just ignore. It would be too easy, too simple for Ben to just shift the way his legs are tucked under himself and fit right under George’s arm and press his cheek against his collar. He could curl up next to him, in this same quaint silence and just sit there with him.

And he’d be happy to, too.

But the spell is broken as George finishes his list, flips the notebook closed and stands, “I’m going to start the laundry and make sure the guest room is all in order. It used to be Alexander’s room when he was living here - so if you stumble upon any hidden bottles of booze or cigarettes, that would be the source.”

Ben can’t help but smirk a little at that. “Do you need a hand?”

“It should be fine, please help yourself to anything you might need. Towels are in the cabinet near the sink in the bathroom if you want to take a shower.”

George, not at all to Ben’s mild surprise, still owns a house phone - complete with a little neatly-printed list of numbers taped next to it. Ben finds one labeled, “*Electrician*,” and dials it while George is busy.

It gives him a busy signal the first time and he tries again, ending up with a confirmation that yes, they can fix his generator - but it’ll take at least another day at the minimum. The roads out there aren’t cleared, the snow picked up again, no way they can get out there - let alone be able to pick out his generator to (most likely) replace it.

Ben bites his lip against a frustrated comment as George rounds the corner, “well whenever you can, it would be much appreciated.”

George raises his brow at that but keeps quiet while Ben finishes his call, the man on the other end

saying, “yeah we got a lot of orders in. Just give us some time.”

He clicks to hang up without comment and Ben sighs into the receiver - hanging it up on its cradle soon after. He pushes his hair back, turning back towards George to relay all the information he’s just been given. George gives him a pretty sympathetic shrug and glances back over his shoulder.

“I guess it’s good I decided to put fresh sheets on the bed, then.”

“Sorry, that I have to stay so long. Really.”

George holds up his hand, “I said it’s fine, Benjamin. Your clothes are in the washer, I’m sorry I don’t have much in the form of entertainment.”

“You don’t need to entertain me,” he assures, “I’m content just watching it snow and talking, to be honest. So - I decided I’m all for putting the garden together in spring, right. Anything I should know?”

They talk too long, by the time George remembers to move the laundry and by the time it’s even close to done the sun’s already set against the continuing snow and Mospey is snoring by the fire and kicking half-idly in his sleep and Ben laughs himself pink-cheeked over one of George’s high-school stories.

“So you stole the other team’s mascot?”

“Off their courtyard, their field and I think we egged every painted-on version we could find. They knew it was us but they didn’t have any proof - the rivalry was big, the schools were small. No one dated from the other school, talking to them was even frowned upon. It could have been anyone.”

“Jesus, they didn’t do anything?”

George shakes his head, “We were the star players right before playoffs - all they could do was give us a ‘stern warning’ at practice the next morning. I’m sure you have plenty of exciting high school stories as well.”

Ben’s nose crinkles as he tries to think back. It was him, Caleb, Abe, Anna and Selah. He and Caleb got into trouble far more often than any of the others - but always for being out past curfew or sneaking out late to drink beer in the bed of Caleb’s pickup and throw rocks into the trees while they whined about course loads and colleges and how stifling Ben’s parents could get. High school Ben didn’t rebel - he kept his head down and didn’t dare out himself to his parents. He was a good kid, Benjamin and Savannah Tallmadge’s youngest son. Sam’s little brother. He knew how to behave himself and not cause waves in his little town.

But college Ben. Yale Ben. On a scholarship with too much to prove and not the right sort of... anything to fit in. Feeling out of place among the waves of rich boys in new polos and khakis, itching for a mis-timed teenage rebellion when he was pushing nineteen.

He scratches the back of his neck, trying to phrase it right and buy himself time to put his thoughts in order.

“Well, not in high school - but, uh, when I was in my second year at Yale,” He pauses, swallowing when he realizes who else is in this story. Who is in every one of his stupid, dumb stories that always took place after too much studying and too many sleepless nights. He continues, “When I was in my second year - Nate and I, we - uh - we got kinda tipsy at a party for a friend’s birthday and decided to take a walk around campus. We got all pissed about how uptight the whole place is all the time and we... decided to lob rocks at a few buildings.”

Something in the air around them changes - Ben hasn't talked about Nate since September, since the anniversary and here he is, sharing information like it's almost nothing. Or at least like he could pretend it's nothing. George doesn't seem fazed - or at least he pretends not to seem fazed and Ben decides to contemplate his hands instead of looking up too much at him to try and gauge how he's feeling.

"Did they catch you two?" He asks, smoothly ignoring the sudden tension that ropes between them. Ben shakes his head.

"No, no. It was all over though, news and I think a paper too. We ended up back at my place before anyone showed up but I think we broke a couple windows and ended up running like two grand in damage or something like that. It was an impressive number and I'm pretty sure we should've been busted." He ends it with a half-sort of laugh and tries to carry the weak, weak momentum into another story - this one about how Nate would always sneak into Ben's communications lecture and doodle all over his notes whenever it got boring.

And then another about Nate coming home with a buzzcut after his first day of student teaching for a young class got him a fist-full of library paste in his hair. He'd been so upset, he kept his hoodie up all day, wore hats, and pouted.

He tells another dumb story and another dumb story and he doesn't want to stop, he doesn't want to clam up and forget about it - he doesn't want to change the subject or move on.

In fact, he's smiling.

He feels it aching in his cheeks soon after, curling up unfamiliar at his lips - and it's nice, he thinks, it's sad but it's still nice. George even looks a little content with the topic's shift and Ben has to break it with: "Do you mind if I ask?"

"Go ahead."

"How'd you meet Martha?"

"I mentioned I only stole the mascot to impress a girl, right? That was her. She was smart, clever, dating a guy on the track team at the time - Daniel, Daniel Custis. She was far from impressed, we only started seeing one another our senior year, she tutored me in English." George keeps it short and crisp but Ben gets the jist of it anyway. The end sticks out a bit to him - that would make them high school sweethearts, and Ben finds that endearing in one way and sad in most others.

There's a tiny flicker of warmth in his chest as he looks back up at the photos adorning his walls. They really were quite a pair, he thinks. But George doesn't let him linger, standing up and stretching his arms above his head in such a way that makes Ben's attention drift to the thin expanse of skin that gets exposed.

He snaps his eyes away again, shame bubbling. They were just talking about their loved ones - casually and friendly, but *still*, Ben can't think of a worse moment for that little spark of attraction to remind him of its existence. He tamps it down as George offers Ben full use of the second shower ("Right across from the bedroom, you can't miss it.") and declares it time for him to retire.

Ben can't help the lingering disappointment, but he helps George put out the fire, move the remains of their bowls from dinner to the kitchen and then stand there - in front of the now-cooled fireplace and beside a now-awake dog - waiting for the moment to end. George rubs the back of his neck and Ben scratches his elbow.

The tension isn't charged, or thick with any sort of awkwardness - it's contemplative and hesitant. Like they're both waiting for the other to do something but there's nothing left to do - no cue cards to tell them their next direction, no lines to scripts to follow. They're just standing there, waiting for something to happen: and it doesn't.

"So," He says after a long, lingering second of silence, "goodnight?"

George looks down, then back, and nods. "Sleep well, Ben."

With some heavy, leaden-footed sense of wrongness, Ben turns and walks - letting George do the same. He's at the mouth of the hallway when he glances back over his shoulder, George vanished back into his room but the door remains just slightly ajar. A faint crack of darkness peering into the room that beckons like a silent invitation. Ben thinks, not for the first time, how easy it would be to tip-toe over, nudge the door open and slide between the sheets and press against his body.

He closes his eyes and retreats back into the little guest room.

George had left a small stack of clothes, one of his old high-school t-shirts and a pair of flannel pajama pants - which he'd put there once he figured out that their delay meant the laundry wouldn't be done until later. But it was done now - Ben's clothes from the night before are sitting on top of a worn and scratched dresser. The temptation is strong.

Too strong.

He flees to the little bathroom across the hall to shower instead, getting the water up to a good temperature before ducking under the spray. There's a few bottles lined up against the wall, shampoo, conditioner, body wash - the basics. Ben takes one and sniffs it, the familiar scent he's come to associate with George washing over him all at once. It's a nice, soft and subtly masculine smell - it contrasts nicely with his aftershave but on it's own Ben thinks it's absolutely perfect.

Pouring a generous amount into his hand, Ben lathers up his hair (graciously cut twice already by Adrienne, who threatened to hold him down and go at him with scissors) and just sort of basks in it. His mind wanders, like it too often does, to the flash of smooth-looking skin and the trail of dark hair that was momentarily exposed by George's shirt.

It's a nice image to linger on while he rinses out his hair - the idea of George lifting that shirt higher and higher until it falls mutely to the floor of the living room. Heated by the fire, blissfully alone - Ben would do the same. Strip down from George's clothes, let George lie him down on the soft rug - kiss his jaw, his lips, his neck, his collar. It's too much to think about, those hands skating up and down his sides, making him shiver.

Ben's cock most certainly takes interest in this almost familiar fantasy. Wrapped up in the warmth of the shower and the smell of George's body wash - Ben bites his lip but doesn't take pause before he slinks his hand down his abdomen and takes himself in hand.

He envisions himself in an array of positions and places, his mind unable to adhere to one fantasy - to Ben rocking slowly in George's lap making him gasp and buck, to Ben bent over the hood of that dinged-up pick-up and George's face buried in his ass, to them rocking together in the loft - it's all just George. George's hands on every inch of his body, George's tongue on him, George's cock *in* him. He's panting and muffling groans against his other hand - desperate to scream out George's name as his world goes bright and he comes all over his fist.

He waits for the guilt to overwhelm him. The guilt at fantasizing about George, the guilt of beating off in his shower.

It doesn't.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The third is tenser, dirt-covered hands sticking less to their own sides and accidentally brushing against one another with muttered sorrys as the only words the shift between them. It's a tension that isn't new, that Ben recognizes as the one's that's been haunting them since Christmas.

But it doesn't go away when Ben stands up and brushes a stray lock of his hair back from his face, it lingers and boils over and reaches a fever pitch when George stands directly in front of him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Pursue some path, however narrow and crooked, in which you can walk with love and reverence."

Staying with George had, thus far, been unreal. They slotted together in a natural rhythm that flows with a comfortable ease. After that first morning, George returns to his normal schedule of waking up before Ben and rousing him with the promise of breakfast and coffee. It should be boring, he thinks, being nudged into something so slow and careful and mundane but Ben can feel it slowly sanding down his edges in places he didn't know he was still jagged and sharp.

Even Mopsey seems to feel the winter lull, snoozing by the fire when Ben flips through the stash of books on political history and Rome that Alex left behind when he moved out.

"He wouldn't mind," George says when Ben asks about them, "if anything it'll give you two more to talk about. Besides, if he left anything behind its because he was - and is - under the impression he doesn't own them."

Ben doesn't press that issue but instead accepts the permission to settle in for long nights with *The Conquest of Gaul* that only end when he falls asleep with it propped open on his chest and wakes up with it carefully bookmarked and set aside on the coffee table and a throw blanket draped over him. He tries not to think about what it means. Just like he tries not to think about what it means when George asks him quiet, contemplative questions about what he's reading or when they fall into silence doing dishes beside one another.

It doesn't, or it shouldn't, mean anything.

And Ben spends two long nights trying desperately to convince himself of that, between each fevered, hot dream he wakes up from and each long shower he spends waiting to feel guilty, waiting to feel dirty and shameful in all the ways he thinks he should.

It reminds him a little of high school, actually, in a sad way. Balancing himself on limbs he couldn't quite control yet, curling his shoulders over to look smaller in the cramped little shower of his parents cramped little house - chewing his lip and trying to carefully unwind that knot in his gut and pray that in the center is the thing that'll fix him, that would make him stop wanting boys like

that.

It never worked. Eventually the blowout fight came when Ben flung open the closet doors the day he loaded all his shit into the back of Caleb's pick-up and started his first year at Yale.

But Ben could see that reaction coming, he could envision it clearly while staring at the beige, stained tile of the shower floor - this, he can't do. He doesn't know what George would say, he doesn't know what George would do - hell, he doesn't know what *to* do. Does he throw himself at him? Tell him he doesn't know if he's ready yet but he might be and on the slimmest chance that George is interested, does he maybe want to do something about it?

And if so, what would they do? The question keeps Ben gnawing at his fingernails and tossing and turning late into the night. Sure, his dreams and his idle, passing fantasies are fairly interested in what they *could* do (his recent subconscious mind has been so violently reminded of how long and thick those fingers are and has been very interested in what they feel like pressing against his tongue) but Ben doesn't actually know much past that.

He was never one for casual sex. Nate used to tell him he “*caught feelings*,” for the first guy who smiled at him (which he wasn't wrong about) but the idea of dating, of actually *dating* someone makes him...

It isn't a feeling he can comprehend. There's a layer of queasy disgust that churns and sits heavy and slick in his gut - but it isn't all-consuming anymore. It's quiet and anxious, rippling instead of roaring and whispering instead of shouting.

They were out watching Mopsey romp around and bite at the snow that falls off the dried and winter-dead tree branches - their fingers curled around hot mugs and scarves winding around their throats - when the realization strikes him that he isn't sure he wants to leave. He can blame the cold if he wants, but Ben shifts his weight and presses, just faintly, against George's shoulder with just the sudden desire to feel him closer.

His heart doesn't jump or clench or race at the touch, but settles calm and steady.

Neither man moves to adjust and Ben feels a grin creep across his lips - he steals a glance up and finds a similar expression adorning George's features.

Ben doesn't want to pack up the small amount of clothes still left behind and walk back to his cold house and crawl into his cold bed and feel that aching hole in his days where George used to be. He's gone without him plenty before and really, Ben doesn't want to go without him *more*. The idea makes him sick and his smile melts down as he stares into his mug - the steam rising in up in little curling waves.

“What's on your mind?” George asks, after a moment. He's looking out at Mopsey still, probably contemplating whether or not he should call him back in to get out of the chill or let him keep playing.

“Nothing.” It sounds more like *I really don't want to talk about it*, so Ben doesn't quite consider it a lie.

“The snow should be cleared tomorrow, by the way, you'll probably be sleeping in your own bed soon enough. You must be glad for that.”

He forces up a laugh, hoping it doesn't sound as awfully fake as it is, and shakes his head, “I guess, yeah. I'll miss having him to keep my feet warm, though.” Ben tilts his head towards where the

brown speck pops up from the snow and, as if cued in by something else, starts bounding over. He's blurry in the distance, since Ben's been left sans glasses and contacts, but he's close enough for him to see that Mops is gonna be sopping wet. He steps back inside to grab the towel waiting by the door.

"I most certainly do," George adds on, following and pulling the door shut behind them once Mopsey's done shaking all the melted snow he can off himself, "though I wouldn't be too heartbroken if he sleeps with you tonight."

Ben crinkles his nose, "You're gonna leave me with the wet dog?"

"Well he is awfully protective of you, I don't see why not."

"Thanks," Ben deadpans as he rubs the wriggling dog down as much as he can while George huffs a noise of amusement above him. "I'll make sure to let him get nice and soaked before I leave."

"I greatly appreciate that, Benjamin."

"No problem, George."

###

George falls asleep, hours later, on the couch, with Ben reading next to him and Mopsey snoozing half on his lap. It takes Ben a while to notice, first - the quiet mumbling under his breath that comes with George reading to himself had stopped. Then, the shifting, the changing position when his knee got too stiff or his back started to twinge also stopped. Ben hardly noticed until another soft, snuffling sound started - not quite loud or consistent enough to be considered a snore, but it was there.

He glances over and George is lying there, slumped against the arm of the couch, his lip twitching down in a sleep-hazy disapproval. Ben picks himself up quietly, careful not to rouse the self-acclaimed light sleeper, and gently sets the nearly finished book down. Tip-toeing around the couch, Ben goes to free the throw blanket from its place folded and set over the back. He contemplates throwing it over the top of him and padding off to bed himself - but he stops himself.

It's just because he knows George shouldn't be sleeping on the couch, he tells himself. It's because of his neck and his back and his knee and really, Ben should wake him up.

But he's a little distracted.

George's hair falls slightly against his forehead and his brow furrows as he shifts and his expression is left unguarded. Ben never gets quiet moments like these to just stare at him - however creepy it is - so he takes it for a second. George's cheeks and the line of his jaw are marked with little scars that Ben never asked where they came from - but he has the pressing urge to smooth his palms over them and press his lips to each little imperfection.

Ben stands, mesmerized by the scene and reaches out on a tentative, hesitant instinct. It feels like his body is a million miles away and he's far too slow to control it - his fingertips brush the warm, soft skin of George's temple before he can stop himself.

He shifts and hums some sweet, tired noise - his eyelids fluttering momentarily and Ben whips his hand back, suddenly returning to his senses with just enough time before George looks up at him, confused and sleep-dazed.

"Hey," Ben whispers, not wanting to break the silence wholly yet, as George sits up with a wince.

“You, uh, you fell asleep. I was trying to wake you up so you didn’t get sore later.”

George takes a moment to think that over, nudging a grumpy and obviously tired Mopsey up off his lap so he can better sit up and stretch his arms high up over his head. Ben makes it a point not to watch this time as his biceps flex against the fabric of his sweater, but it is an alluring thought.

“Thank you,” he says after a moment, rubbing his leg idly and waiting until he stands up, “I appreciate that, Benjamin.”

“I just figured...” he trails off and clears his throat, “I think I’m gonna head to bed soon - do you need anything?”

“Sleep well, Benjamin,” he says instead of a refusal. Despite his promises, that night, Mopsey sleeps in George’s room - leaving Ben to toss and turn relentlessly against an onslaught of fantasy. When sleep doesn’t claim him, he lays awake instead, this time thinking about that cracked door.

It would be easy, too easy, to act on every dream he’s had about George. But he doesn’t, he rolls over, buries his nose in the pillow that still smells distinctly like George and curls himself around it. When morning comes it brings the electrician and Ben stands on the porch of his own house, idly kicking ice and snow and trying not to think of their lingering, almost painful goodbye.

He’s wearing George’s shirt still. Neither of them mentioned it as Ben dressed in a hurry, trying to make sure he had all of his things - almost forgetting his scarf until George wrapped it around his neck. Ben can still remember the way his breath hitched and just how close George was to him and the way George’s lips parted when he smoothed the ends of the scarf down over Ben’s chest.

Ben mulls over the thought, the warm knot in his stomach unwinding slowly as he thinks about how desperately he wanted to kiss him in that moment. He should have, his traitorous mind supplies. He really should have.

The generator gets replaced and by the time night falls again, Ben’s lying in his own bed - not sleeping, but staring up at his ceiling instead, the thought of what George’s lips would feel like overwhelming him.

George, curiously, isn’t home when Ben swings by a few days later - a small bundle of carefully wrapped packages cradled in his arms. He debates waiting, debates taking them back to try again later and then ends up leaving them on the porch with a little note that says “*Merry Christmas*” on top.

The next morning, he wakes up to a box on his porch and a note in a familiar scrawl.

“*Merry Christmas.*”

Ben feels himself smile as he picks it up, setting it inside. He doesn’t want to bother George, despite a constant reassurance that his presence over the holidays would be greatly wanted - and Christmas rolls past. George comes by with a foil-covered dish full of food anyway, Mopsey wearing the flannel shirt (intended for a toddler) that Ben had left wrapped on his porch.

Ben starts using the mug George had given him almost exclusively.

He notices the painting, a watercolor print of a distant, rolling field in the midsts of spring - dotted with cherry trees, that he’d found for George for Christmas hanging on the wall the next time he visits.

Things are comfortable, with only the faintest underlying tension left whenever the pair of them are

perfectly alone. It's the same tension from that night, standing before each other, waiting for the other to take the next step - not sure what the next step should be.

Ben tries not to pull back at New Years - but he does. He declines all invitation and calls Caleb - tearing at the label of the now-empty bottle of beer (he promised himself he'd only have the one. Celebrating was fine, getting drunk on your own was just pathetic) while they reminisced.

If he closes his eyes, even with Caleb droning on in the background about that one time he and Ben got so drunk they threw up in the river, he can still feel Nate's hands on his hips - the echo of a joke that turned too real too fast, *"You know, it's a damn shame you don't have anyone to kiss tonight..."*

He was charming, in his stupid glittery paper hat and confetti in his hair, and Ben hadn't even thought before he crushed their lips together.

Nate tasted like the punch that he'd been drinking since he arrived and the leftover candy cane he'd found hiding somewhere.

Spring brings little rows of tilled dirt and tulip bulbs tucked between the spaces ready to be planted to fill up the space with color. It brings a carefully-copied notebook full of whatever assorted knowledge George mentioned; it brings dirt under his fingernails and a tan that stops right at his mid-bicep.

Everything's just beginning to flourish and change around him in a far nicer fashion than it had in fall. Instead of everything crumbling and dying, it blooms. Sure, it's been kicking up his allergies in a wicked way - but that's nothing a couple Benadryl and some steamy showers can't fend off. Especially when it means he can peacefully follow George's specific instructions for when it comes to taking care of his little garden.

As it stands - it's not too big yet. Two short rows, lined with tulips now, are marked out for which plant Ben wants to put there and George was gracious enough to loan out a corner of his potting shed for Ben to start out some of the tougher plants. George had tried to talk him out of the tomatoes, but Ben's really always wanted at least one little tomato plant -- and now he can get it.

He gives it a short little scan-over once he's finished marking out plots and dusts off his hands with the sort of satisfaction one gets from a job, thus far, well done. With nothing else left to do and whirlwind of energy buzzing at his heels, Ben makes his way over to George's - a bit of a bounce to his step.

The door swings open after two knocks and three loud, hurried barks.

"Ben, I wasn't expecting you today." There's no disdain or accusation in George's voice, just a genuine bewilderment - as though without some tragedy Ben wouldn't be inclined to swing by.

But he considered them, at the very least, friends. Though, Ben did at least have a reason to stop in.

"I wanted to check in on the plants."

"I told you you didn't have to ask first, it's always unlocked," George says, slipping a bit from his tight-backed posture and leaning just faintly against the doorframe while Mopsey breathes hot on the back of Ben's knee, looking for attention.

It's given as Ben shrugs, "I know, I wanted to know if you wanted to go down to it with me? Give me the history of the tomato again or something."

George's frown isn't a new one, Ben's close enough to understanding most of the other little microscopic shifts. When the corners of his lip twitch down like this and his brows furrow just faintly: he's confused. When he huffs quietly through his nose, he's entertained. When his eyes flicker down Ben's body and his jaw tenses and he looks away - Ben isn't completely sure what that means. He hopes it means what he thinks it means - but he'd rather be quiet than wrong.

But this confused pinch of his expression is more than just that - it's a thin confliction that Ben's only come to realize recently. After Christmas, after the snowstorm, George has been hesitating more - like he needs more time to contemplate his actions, more time to think about what he's doing and how it's going to be perceived.

It's a tense moment before George steps outside, leaving Mopsey on the other side of the door, and walks with him to the little neatly-tucked away potting shed.

"The history of tomatoes?" George finally says, voice tinged with amusement, "I must admit my knowledge there is rather... lacking. But I can give you the most basic problems you may run into growing them - and how to circumvent them?"

"That might just be more useful," Ben hums as he thumbs along the edge of a terracotta pot, "I'm sure I'll be on you a lot to give me a hand fixing those problems too, though."

"I don't mind at all, I enjoy spending time with you," George assures - standing over Ben's tiny little plot. The plants haven't quite started sprouting up yet - and until they did there wasn't much to do, but Ben had to admit he liked the shed. It was warm, admittedly, and pretty humid - but there was something about the nature of it that he likes. The tools that are hanging in neat rows, the stacks of pots all with remnants of dirt and soil clinging to them the seed packets and dowels for creeping little vines to cling on to for support.

"I like spending time with you too, George."

It's comforting, if a bit of a tight fit for the two of them - but Ben finds he doesn't exactly mind the closeness.

"I've got some things that need to be planted in the garden, if you'd like to help while we talk," George asks - something else in his voice that Ben can't identify. He agrees before George even finishes his sentence.

"Some things" turned out to be three things precisely - a couple of plants meant to go around the back of the garden, designed to keep the bees happy and content. There are already places marked and dug out for them - all they need is a transfer, but George talks about aphids and uneven watering more than enough to fill the time. Ben listens as much as he watches him insist on carrying one pot in each arm and leaving Ben to take up one of them.

He stops talking about fruitworms and other pests when they have the first one placed gently into the soil - and for the next one, they have silence.

The third is more tense, dirt-covered hands sticking less to their own sides and accidentally brushing against one another with muttered *sorrys* as the only words the shift between them. It's a tension that isn't new, that Ben recognizes as the one that's been haunting them since Christmas.

But it doesn't go away when Ben stands up and brushes a stray lock of his hair back from his face, it lingers and boils over and reaches a fever pitch when George stands directly in front of him.

"You've got..." he gestures to the side of Ben's face and he only realizes, belatedly, that he must

have gotten dirt on himself.

He scrubs at his cheek.

“Did I get it?”

“No, here, let me,” George cups the side of Ben’s face and swipes his thumb across the rise of his cheekbone. Gently, but firmly enough - and then he does it again, and again, stepping forward. Ben feels like a man possessed, wholly unsure of what's come over him, but he steps forward too. And then again, until they're toe-to-toe and Ben’s own fingers trail across the line of George’s jaw.

Everything around him feels distant, hazy and blurred around the edges - and all he can feel is lips against his own and a sudden shift, like everything’s clicked quietly into place.

Chapter End Notes

Well. That happened.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Ben feels the air being sucked from his lungs. Of course George would know his feelings on this, would comprehend them, but hearing the sentiment repeated back to him with such sincerity - Ben can't actually think of anything he could have needed more than that reassurance.

"To fill the hour—that is happiness." -- Walt Whitman

Ben hasn't kissed anyone in a very long time - and he assumes George hasn't either, but they fall into an easy rhythm quickly. Ben's arms wrap around George's neck, pulling himself up as much as he pulls him down and the other of George's that isn't still cupping his face is wrapping firm around his waist.

They stay there like that for what feels like decades, until Ben feels a little breathless just by the touch and George pulls back, looking dazed.

"We should..." George starts, right when Ben says, "That was..."

"You go first, Ben."

"No, you. I don't think I can, I mean..." He trails off as he leans in to take another taste of George's lips and the man folds into it. The hand on Ben's face shifts and slips through his hair Ben's hands slide down to George's chest without his permission. He's so solid, he's so real. He's there, he's there under his fingers and Ben's head doesn't feel any clearer when they part again.

"We should talk." George's voice is rough and he steals a third, shorter kiss and Ben takes the fourth.

"We should," he agrees breathlessly - and then it settles in the back of his throat exactly what they're doing and he doesn't feel bad. There's no outstanding guilt, there's no sudden tide of agony. It just sits there, thick and confused. He's kissing George, he's kissing George and it feels right. He's kissing George and it's incredible and he doesn't want to stop - he wants to pull George back down and kiss him again and make up for the last six month's worth of not doing this.

It takes all of Ben's restraint to take his hands off of George's body and not throw himself against him again.

"Yeah," he says, "yeah, we should talk - about this, and... and this." He gestures vaguely and licks his lower lip absentmindedly - only realizing what he's done once George's eyes flicker down with a dark flash of want. "Maybe we can talk inside? On the couch?" Maybe Ben lets slip a bit of innuendo into his tone, maybe he steps a little bit closer - maybe he lets his fingers brush along George's so very gently. But it works.

Soon, he's washed the dirt from his hands and cheek and George's strong arms are wrapped around his waist and his tongue slips past willing lips as they press the lengths of their bodies together.

Very little talking had taken place and of course, it was most certainly the adult thing to do - to reasonably discuss their boundaries, but Ben can already feel that knot of dread forming solid and hard in his gut when he thinks too much about it

George's teeth nip his lower lip when he pulls away and Ben shivers in his grasp, fingers twisting in his shirt.

He looks nice like this. Hair mussed by Ben's wandering fingers, cheeks pink, and lips slick and a little redder. Ben can only imagine what he must look like that George is giving him that awe-struck and hazy look. George doesn't take his hands back - but instead shifts them to Ben's hips - idly rubbing soft circles with his thumbs over the thin fabric of his shirt.

It's distracting to say the least.

"George... what do," he swallows, and tries to train away the throbbing of his heart in his chest, "what do you want from this?"

The rubbing stops and George's brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"Like, I don't - I've never done casual. And I meant what I said in October, and now would be a good time to say if you're not interested in anything serious because I can't do that." It all comes out on one breath and he doesn't dare look at George. Instead he fixates on the pillow behind him. George adjusts his grip and slides one hand up Ben's side - over his shoulder to nudge his chin up.

Ben follows the guiding touch and George looks at him with a rare, simmering warmth. "Ben," he whispers, "this has never meant anything casual to me. I understand if that is too much for you right now, if you want me to stop, I will."

"Don't." The words rush out before he stops them, "Don't you *dare* stop."

They meet again in the middle, with that sorted and okay - they have a lot more left to talk about still, but it can wait because right now, Ben sighs into the kiss and puts just the faintest amount of pressure on George to lean back. Ben doesn't have much interest in going past this, at least not today, but that doesn't mean he doesn't want the little enjoyment of being able to drape himself over George's chest to kiss him until he's breathless.

Which he does. Again and again and again, until George makes this little sound in the back of his throat that Ben finds wholly irresistible, and resigns himself to chasing it to try and make him make it again. He does with a much similar reaction from Ben and, he's glad that George's will is a lot more ironclad than his own because Ben's fingers itch to touch bare skin. George doesn't dip under the hem of Ben's shirt and Ben doesn't make the first move to advance it so they stay like that.

Ben's reminded, a bit, of what he'd always fantasized his high school years should have been. Lazily kissing on the couch, no one around to judge them or sneer. He falls apart under George's lips and tongue, until he comes up once more and, instead of returning, presses his nose into the crook of George's neck.

There's a comfortable quiet, the sort that Ben doesn't want to break, before George shifts and presses his lips against the top of Ben's head. He can feel George's interest just faintly, and he knows George can feel his as well, but neither of them make any move to stop the heat from quietly burning out.

"This is nice," George says, "very."

"It is," comes Ben's tired, relaxed response. "It really is."

They get a bit more talking done - between an insistence to take care of that, and their gardens - before the lapse into another long, slow make out session (the next time in the kitchen, then again at Ben's. Never again in George's living room. It's too weird, too strange to kiss George there on his couch and look up to find Martha's likeness smiling softly down at him through the glossy finish of the photographs.) and time seems to meld together moment by moment into a sticky, melted lump of days. Ben finds himself missing George far more viscerally when he's gone and wanting their time together to never end.

George mentions, while they're pressed together in Ben's living room, he's ever actually done anything like this before - in that sort of casual, off-handed way that belies the months of agonizing about it beforehand. At first, Ben's confused. He knows George hasn't seen anyone since Martha's death, he knows she and George were together since high school.

It clicks half a second before George admits what he means.

"I've never been with a man, Ben. I've known I was attracted to them for a while but I've never acted upon it, in any physical way, with someone else."

Ben's response is a shocked little "Oh."

Realistically, Ben should have realized. If he'd done the math at all, it makes a lot of sense that George hasn't done this before, but he hadn't even thought of that hurdle. His mouth opens before he has time to finish thinking.

"That's fine, we all had to have a first time." He isn't sure who the royal *we* is here but, he thinks his point is made and that was probably the best thing to say. Then he looks over to George, whose pinched little frown tells him maybe not so much.

Ben cracks him half a smile and George still frowns - but it's not his usual, displeased or confused expression, it's more petulant, struggling to keep its place on his features. He swoops in and kisses the corner of his frown, assuring him with a soft promise of, "It's fine, I swear."

"I'm not completely naive, Benjamin, I've done my fair share of research." George only takes out the full name when he's got a point to make - but Ben can't quite summon it within himself to take him totally seriously. Especially with a confession like that.

"Research?"

"The Internet is a wealth of information, I just so happened to delve into it to see what would be the best way to..." George trails off, waving his hand in a vague sort of gesture before he finishes with a half-awkward, "Please you."

Ben's grin is wicked as he shifts better into George's lap, elbows resting on his shoulders, half-whispering: "You want to please me?"

One hand comes to rest on his waist, the other at the small of his back as George makes a low sound of want in the back of his throat. Ben's tiny futon doesn't offer much for reclining back unless he folds it down, but they make do - Ben straddling George's lap as he sits, straight-backed. It's not the first time Ben has been in a position to feel the way he works George up. Pressed against him, just enough that Ben can feel it but never enough that he feels like he's got to do something about it, especially when his own response is half-hard in his jeans, but for the first time Ben's finding it hard to resist the urge to grind down against him and really *feel* him in his jeans.

"I most certainly do," George responds, voice low and rough with the same heat in his eyes. Ben

half-expects him to scoop Ben up and flip their positions onto the floor, but instead George just drops his hands down from where he teases the strip of Ben's skin just above the waistband of his jeans, "but not here."

Ben takes pause and pulls back for a moment and gives George an admittedly puzzled look. It wasn't like he was really expecting them to do so much so soon - but he's a little taken aback by the abruptness in which the building tension shrinks. There's a moment that he knows he's just staring and blinking at George before he continues: "You said you wanted to take things slowly, and we haven't even discussed sex and what we consider ourselves to be ready for."

"You're right," Ben shifts off George's lap, despite the way his hands jump to keep him there.

George protests his movement, quietly but Ben just shakes his head and repeats, "You're right. Sorry, I guess I just got a little worked up."

"I did too, but I don't want to push you too far too soon, Ben. Not just with love-making, but with anything."

He closes his eyes and he wants to say George can't overwhelm him with this, or at least that he knows George won't, but even Ben knows that's a lie. He honestly doesn't know what he's ready for, he's not sure if it's going to be twisting in George's lap or his hand down his pants or his cock inside him that breaks him down, or if he'll even break down at all. Kissing has, through a long series of trials now, been proven perfectly fine but Ben's kissed people before. He's kissed plenty of people before. Drunk in Caleb's uncle's basement when he was sixteen playing spin the bottle, or embarrassed, flustered, and curious behind the church with a choir boy while his dad talked up everyone he could.

He can't articulate his fears, he can't find the best way to say all of that without that deep-burning guilt searing through him so instead he tells him the basest of truths that link all of his thoughts together: "I only ever slept with Nate. He was my first, and for five years I thought he'd be my only. So honestly, George, I don't know what I'm ready for or when I'll be ready or if I'll *ever* be ready if I'm not already."

There's a pause, and too easily Ben can imagine George leaving. Deciding that this was too much, that Ben wouldn't shut up about his dead boyfriend, that there was just too much baggage.

But he doesn't.

"Martha was my first. We were seventeen, I was," he huffs a bit of a laugh, echoing with a distant sadness, "not hers. I understand your fears, Ben, and I must admit that I'm not sure myself. This is different, of course, from what I'm used to and I can't say that I ever considered even the *possibility* of being with another person after her."

Ben feels the air being sucked from his lungs. Of course George would know his feelings on this, would comprehend them, but hearing the sentiment repeated back to him with such sincerity - Ben can't actually think of anything he could have needed more than that reassurance.

Though, he doesn't complain when a hand curls under his chin and drags Ben to meet his eye and George amends what he said with a simple, "That is, until I met you."

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The education goes both ways, and Ben's fast to pick up on the fact that just barely clipping George's earlobe between his teeth is the fastest way to make his breath hitch in the back of his throat. He learns that George shivers, full-bodied and desperate when Ben digs his blunted nails into the curve of his biceps.

It becomes a rhythm, one that they fall easily into but doesn't bore them to tears. Gardening and talking - it's almost exactly what they'd been doing before but with now the added bonus of being allowed to touch and kiss each other. They fall into a new system, however, once the crops begin to flourish around them. Ben returns to working at Gilbert's side - tending to his own garden at sun-up, spending breakfast with George then working as much as can be anticipated through the day.

"We were together. I forget the rest." - Walt Whitman

Ben doesn't stop thinking about that afternoon, not as the spring melts into the early stages that prelude another summer. They weather their own storms together - Ben and Nate's anniversary, and very soon after, the anniversary of Martha's death. They make it through the other side, battered and worn but tangled together without fail, George resting his head on Ben's shoulder while he rakes his fingers through his hair and presses a soft, lingering kiss to his temple.

They watch Ben's garden bloom together, their days alternating between moving the plants from their pots to the actual garden itself or with Ben on his back in the budding garden and George tracing calloused hands just under the hem of his shirt making him shiver while George mouths down the line of his neck. George is a quick study. He learns that no matter how often he tells Ben he doesn't need to be quiet, Ben will bite his lip to muffle all the embarrassing gasps and whines he wants to make when George nips along his throat.

He also learns when Ben can't hold them back.

Like when he's working a bruise low on his collarbone and letting slip just the barest sliver of his strength to hold tight to Ben's hips while his hands flex uselessly against the dirt.

The education goes both ways, however, and Ben's fast to pick up on the fact that just barely clipping George's earlobe between his teeth is the fastest way to make his breath hitch in the back of his throat. He learns that George shivers, full-bodied and desperate when Ben digs his blunted nails into the curve of his biceps.

It becomes a rhythm, one that they fall easily into but doesn't bore them to tears. Gardening and talking - it's almost exactly what they'd been doing before but with now the added bonus of being allowed to touch and kiss each other. They fall into a new system, however, once the crops begin to flourish around them. Ben returns to working at Gilbert's side - tending to his own garden at sun-

up, spending breakfast with George then working as much as can be anticipated through the day.

It's a rare morning off with the promise of an even busier week ahead of them, and Ben considers spending it sleeping in or reading in the cool comfort of his living room - but he ends up at George's after his internal clock yells at him to wake up at the crack of dawn anyway.

"The farmers market starts next week," Ben hums, once the sun gets too high and it gets too hot to press their bodies together and instead they end up sweating side-by-side, pulling weeds from a promising-looking bunch of peppers in George's garden.

"I know, you and Gil have been busy."

Ben doesn't say that he's pretty sure Gil has been far busier than he has. He barges in at all hours without knocking - more often than not already mid-sentence with some new problem or new idea or new system. There's also little for Ben to complain about there, considering Gilbert's constant interruptions mean George is hesitant to start anything with Ben in the living room again. Though, George has clarified that it isn't that he doesn't want to tell Gilbert and Adrienne - it's only that he wants the timing to be right and that yes, he thinks Ben's being paranoid when he says that he thinks Adrienne already knows.

But that isn't what most preoccupies Ben at the moment: instead he's thinking of how best to phrase his next question. It's been sitting on the tip of his tongue the last few days. Every moment he has with Gilbert, George or Adrienne he's wanted to ask but he couldn't force the words out and he knows, admittedly, that it's because he's afraid of the answer. Because he knows what it should be, but he also knows what it is.

Gilbert says *we* like he hasn't even considered it.

"Hey, George?" Ben starts, because they're the only words that aren't sticking to the roof of his mouth. He gets a noise of acknowledgement as George tosses an uprooted weed over his shoulder. Ben swallows back everything else and just decides on the most bare-bones, to the point question he can get to: "Should I be helping with the market this season?"

There's a pause, and then, "Why shouldn't you?"

"The last time I did, I got into a fist-fight in front of everyone, George. Having me there can't look good for your stand, I'm just thinking logistically. Small towns talk so I'm sure most people know about the fight at the very least, and what Bradford was implying about me and you at the very most. If having me there is going to damage your reputation, then I shouldn't." Ben sits back on his heels as he talks, staring firmly at the little mound of overturned dirt he's created. He can feel George's eyes on him, but he can't bring himself to look up and see the fact that he's right reflecting back in George's eyes.

He's right and he knows he's right, and with nothing to do but stare at his hands, he finds a half-curved leaf to fidget with, shredding it between his fingers.

George hasn't said anything, but Ben can still feel him staring - contemplating something. Ben figures it's probably the best way to tell him that Ben really shouldn't show his face in town again, at least not at the market. But George, infuriatingly, doesn't say anything - and Ben practically set it up for him. He said all the hard parts, he understands why he shouldn't go back, all George has to do is agree with him. But he doesn't. He covers Ben's clenched hand with his own instead.

He waits until Ben looks up at him to speak.

“It's been six months, Ben. When it comes to rumor, six months is sixty years - a million different versions of that story have been told. To William's friends, you're a coward who only takes cheap shots when he isn't looking-”

Ben looks sharply away, a frustrated huff escaping him before he can stop it, but George's hand is swifter, turning him back to face him again.

“But, to the many, many more people who can't stand him *or* his friends - you just did what they've been waiting to for years. Next Sunday I want you to go help Gilbert and Adrienne. I can't make you, but I'd like you to.”

He tilts his head just enough that George gets the idea and slides his hand across Ben's jaw, letting him lean into the comforting touch. His hands are always warm, always rough with that powerful hint of strength that seeps through just enough to be comforting. He presses into it, one of Ben's own hands abandoning his ruined leaf to instead curl his fingers around George's fingers. He holds him there.

“You also want me to let Gilbert pay me,” Ben half-mumbles against the calloused skin of George's palm.

“If I can only get you to concede to one today, that's enough.”

The issue of payment is another discussion Ben doesn't want to have today, teetering towards the end of his lease and there's no way Ben can afford to throw out that much money at once again. At least not without a job, or two, considering Ben's pretty sure hauling crates wouldn't make him what he needs.

But that's a discussion for another time, especially with Sunday looming before them.

He asks instead: “Do you think it's a good idea? To go?”

“Does it matter that I do?”

Ben doesn't even have to think about it, pulling George's hand from his face to hold it between his own instead. He holds it palm down, thumbs sweeping over the rise of his knuckles and along the vein on the back of his hand and over the freckles that spot them every summer. He's got nice hands. Ben keeps telling him so, keeps telling him he always thought so, but George shrugs it off. *They're just hands*, he tells him, but Ben traces down George's middle finger, long and thick and strong. He's so different from anything Ben's used to.

He's tall where Ben's used to short, he's broad where he's used to slender, he's hesitant where Ben's used to decisive. He's different from anything Ben's ever been used to, and it shows.

“Yeah,” he says after a long moment. “It does matter.”

“Then I do, Ben, I think it is a good idea that you continue to go. Especially since Gilbert is considering doing multiple venues over the week now and especially because it seems like it made you happy.”

George pulls Ben's hand up and presses a soft kiss his knuckles before he continues, “But you have time to decide. You've been working hard, Gilbert told me it's your day off. You should go home, unwind. You got quite a bit done today.”

“I didn't finish with the peppers,” Ben protests as George moves to stand up. He winces in sympathy at the popping and cracking of George's joints but doesn't deny the offered hand to pull

himself up.

“They’ll keep,” George insists, dusting off his hands once Ben’s sure on his feet. “It wouldn’t be the first time I left a job until tomorrow. Go home Ben, lie down, take a shower.”

“Wanna join me?” The words fall with a comfortable instinct, and Ben doesn’t quite realize the implication until it’s staring him in the face in the form of George’s quirked brow and the bemused curl of his lip. Ben doesn’t even rush to clarify, he just lets his shoulders sag with the acknowledgement that he’s been caught in an unintentional innuendo.

Instead he just breathes out a small *“You know what I mean.”*

George nods. “I’ll shower here then head over.”

Ben doesn’t linger on his way home, he gives George one chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth then heads back. He wasn’t feeling too disgustingly sweaty while wrist-deep in dirt - but by the time he nudges his door open he feels positively drenched in it and it’s not at all a good feeling. He peels himself out of his clothes and showers quickly and efficiently under a cool spray.

He debates, once he’s suitably redressed in something softer and cleaner, between curling up on the futon and waiting for George or clambering up into bed. They hadn’t actually been up there together yet, or in any bed together, and Ben’s stomach twists up into a knot of anxiety around the idea. If he’s in the bed will George get the wrong idea? They’d talked, generally, about the idea and they’d agreed that some things would be more easily approached than others - but Ben stares at the ladder.

Then at the futon.

There’s a steady ache in his back from being bent over working and it throbs harder at just the idea of having to tangle himself around George to get even marginally comfortable on the futon and his decision is made up for him. He takes out his contacts and accepts his fate.

His bed is too comfortable. He burrows himself under the blankets and, all at once, a wave of exhaustion from the week rolls over him. He’s dragged down by the undertow and his eyes feel so heavy and his pillow is too soft and he just rests his eyes for a second before a knock draws him out of his sleepy haze.

“Come on in, it’s unlocked,” he calls down - interrupting himself with a long, muffled yawn midway through. He tucks his head back under the comforter once he hears the door open, fighting away the mid-afternoon sun that streaks in through his windows.

“Hello?” At least it’s definitely George. At the confusion in his voice Ben pulls his head out from his little bundle once more to respond.

“Up here.”

“Oh...” He sounds a little conflicted and Ben peers down the best he can without his glasses and tries to make out his expression. George doesn’t keep him in suspense long, though, and he clears his throat. “If you wanted to lie down, I can go.”

Ben looks over, and tilts his head at George’s response. “No. I don’t want you to go, I want you to join me. Come on, you’re bound to be exhausted too.”

There’s another little sound and George hesitates and, for a moment, Ben thinks he’s gone too far. They hadn’t talked about this, they hadn’t talked about the concept of sharing a bed for any reason

whatsoever. Ben didn't think it would be that much of a problem, but George eyes the ladder warily.

Then he climbs.

"It's a low roof," he notes when his head pops up over the edge, peering around. Ben didn't really bother to pick up much and he's suddenly regretting it. A pair of his boxers is kicked aside in a corner with a ratty t-shirt and a wad of socks that he hasn't gotten around to washing. His laptop is on its side against the wall, wrapped up in its charger.

Even though he knows George won't mind, it doesn't stop the bolt of anxiety running down his back. But George doesn't even glance at the mess as he pulls himself up with a little sound of effort. Ben doesn't wait, he just charges headlong into it once George crawls up onto the bed. He presses the length of his body against George's before either of them can change their mind, but it doesn't seem like George intends to as he shifts and wraps an arm around Ben as soon as he can.

It isn't strange or awkward like Ben had anticipated.

They tangle together, Ben ending up with his nose pressed against George's neck, their chests flush together and their arms twined around one another. It's safe, secure. He feels George's breathing even out as he closes his eyes and relaxes against him. Ben shifts and presses his face down against the hollow of his throat, breathing in the soft edge of spice that comes with his aftershave.

"Have I told you, you smell good?" he asks, voice thick with sleep.

George's response isn't much better as he shuffles and wraps his arms a fraction tighter around Ben. "I started wearing it to make a good impression on you."

Ben makes a quiet, accepting noise, far too exhausted to do anything but that. He wants to ask if he's being serious, if the entire time Ben's been picking up on that orange and clove sort of scent it's been because George wanted to impress him. But the words are too much and Ben can just press his lips right there to George's collar in a soft kiss instead.

So he does, and his skin is warm beneath his lips and George makes a gentle sound.

He doesn't know how long they lie there, but Ben drifts in and out of a distant sort of sleep, never quite slipping all the way under but never quite pulling himself fully out of its grasp. He wriggles closer, trying to get as much of himself pressed against George as possible, draping one of his legs over George's hips and hooking them closer, and then closer still, and he moves to wriggle himself into a different position when he hears George's breath catch above him and Ben pauses with his thigh between George's, just barely brushing against him. It takes him a moment to realize exactly where, but once he does, he feels his face flush a deep pink.

"Sorry," Ben whispers, tilting his face up to George, "I, uh, I didn't..."

Hands fall at his hips once he tries to move, keeping him in place and Ben's heart jumps up and threatens to slip across the bed and right down off the loft when George pulls Ben closer and asks, "Is this okay?"

He pulls Ben so their legs slot together, and just a slow roll of Ben's hips would grind him down against George's thigh.

Ben does exactly that and sighs, laced thick with a needy sort of pleasure, "Yes."

It takes a few missed steps but they work into a rhythm, rocking slowly together and Ben buries his

nose back in George's chest and those fine fingers work their way under Ben's shirt as he guides them together with one strong hand on the small of his back.

The sounds George makes are incredible and Ben bites his lip hard to keep himself from drowning them out with his own. He's little huffs and short groans and gasps whenever Ben pushes his thigh up harder and flexes against the evident hardness in his jeans. If Ben thought George was something impressive before, straddling his lap during one of their numerous lazy make-outs, this is something else entirely. Each carefully measured roll of George's hips drags Ben closer and pushes him higher and God, Ben can imagine too well what it would be like to be caged in those arms, have those hips working against him; and if how hot and hard and big he feels in his jeans has any semblance as to how he's going to be out of them, Ben's already aching for him.

But that's for another time because right now there's a hot buzz of pleasure curling around the base of his spine as he grinds himself against George slowly, chasing the edge of want.

"Just," he pants, pulling his face up again and catching George's lips in an embrace that's more just sliding and breathing together than kissing, "just a little harder."

And George obliges, one hand slipping higher against Ben's back and the other wrapping firm around his waist to keep him in place as he pushes that powerful leg higher and harder against Ben. He grinds it up and pulls Ben with him instead of letting him do it himself and Ben's been teetering too close to the edge for too long to complain at all.

He's nearly there when he feels it, George's hips picking up a more insistent pace against Ben's leg, his thighs flexing and pulling him tighter as he switches gears for just long enough.

The sound George makes when he comes ripples through Ben. He feels it where their chests are pressed together, he hears it hot and heavy against his ear when George slips from his lips to *growl* it so close to him. Ben's pretty sure there's never been a more erotic sound that he's ever bared witness to.

Jesus, he doesn't even need to come once he hears that, he's too much in awe of it, in awe of George, to care about anything else in the moment. But George doesn't let up, hand moving down to get a palmful of Ben's ass to get him closer. He bites down Ben's neck, lapping and kissing along where he knows Ben is most sensitive. From there, it's only a few more hard, insistent twists of Ben's hips down against him until he's shuddering through an orgasm that shakes him down to the bones.

They don't pull apart for quite some time. They lie there, instead, panting together and letting the sweat cool. George's jack-rabbit heartbeat matches time with Ben's own.

George mumbles something, tucking his face against Ben's neck. He hasn't let him go, either around his waist or the hand on his ass. In fact, he gives it a little pat and then curves his hand better around it as he mumbles.

Ben makes an inquisitive noise and curves his back to push himself into George's grasp.

"I said I *just* showered," George clarifies, and Ben hums and neither man makes any attempt to detangle themselves from each other as they drift down into a soft, exhausted sleep.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

"I have plans for tonight," George says, but he doesn't pull back. Instead he thumbs along Ben's cheekbone and Ben can feel the confusion bubbling on his features. Plans?

George doesn't go out, he stays home. What plans could he possibly have?

"I meant for us."

"Nature is always lovely, invincible, glad, whatever is done and suffered by her creatures. All scars she heals, whether in rocks or water or sky or hearts." John Muir

When Gilbert gets wind of Ben's reluctance to rejoin him at the market, he is the farthest thing from pleased. It breaks over the monthly dinner, George and Ben sitting a respectful distance from one another - because if George doesn't want Gilbert to know, Ben thinks it a fair bet that he doesn't want Alex to know either.

He isn't sure how it comes up, but the chaos comes immediately after.

"What do you mean you thought we would not want you to join us?" It's safe to say Gilbert is aghast at the suggestion, hand pressed over his chest and nose stuck up in the air. "You are a friend, Benjamin, and the town should be throwing themselves at your feet in honor of what you did to that weasel."

Adrienne is more subdued. She pats his arm with a startling amount of affection and tells him, "Of course we want you to help, Gilbert has not stopped planning for the entire season and, with how much he has included you already, I had thought you were asked."

That affection is then given an edge as she takes her hand back and flicks her husband, chiding, "Ask. Benjamin is, *unfortunately*, not in your employ. You cannot drag him to Richmond if he does not want to go."

Gilbert asks and Ben agrees, and that's how come Sunday he finds himself standing in his bathroom before the sun even rises in a pair of jeans that are far too tight.

Ben spends a better part of the time after his shower that morning prodding at himself with the realization that he no longer looks like the sunken corpse of himself he did a year ago. And he isn't entirely sure how content with that he is. The weight he put on in the fall melded into weight he'd put on in the winter and, standing in front of the mirror that morning, he prods at the softness

around his stomach with a displeased frown.

Sure, it isn't like he's in terrible shape but he's pretty sure he could stand to lose a few of those pounds he'd picked up.

It wouldn't have mattered last year, or even six months ago, but now Ben's got someone who'd probably like to see him naked at some point. His stomach churns at that thought. Of course, it isn't at the idea of sleeping with George that Ben recoils, but at the idea of being so exposed.

Fuck, he used to run. He used to work out and flick Nate's ear whenever he tried to talk Ben into three nights of pizza in a row. Nate had the metabolism of a teenage hummingbird - nothing he ate seemed to touch him, but he still joined Ben at the gym or on runs and humored him when Ben insisted on healthier habits. He wasn't stupid, he knew there were kids whispered behind his back, cramming the front rows, tripping over themselves when he asked for volunteers to pass back papers and going absolutely *red* whenever he got even marginally closer during his tutoring hours. He didn't mind that much, they were teenagers, not exactly in their prime of subtlety. And Ben was young and attractive.

Was. It's like he's aged fifteen years in almost two. He's still pretty sure that potentially gray hair he'd found was just super light blond. He's twenty-nine, he's not decrepit. Ben decides to stop this heinous line of thought right then and there and, instead, pull on his undershirt and then let the button-up hang off his shoulders as he checks the time.

He told George he'd be over early, grab some coffee, have Gilbert pick him up there - and if he wanted to at least get in some privacy (and what comes with it), he was going to have to hurry. He leaves it unbuttoned as he grabs everything he needs to and heads out.

Ben's got half a foot into the door when he's grabbed. One arm around his waist, one hand pulling the door shut behind him only to slam Ben against it. As soon as it clicks, there's a familiar mouth on his and Ben's hands scramble for George's back.

"We don't have much time before he gets here," George manages between kisses. He tugs on the hem of Ben's shirt - nudging it up just a little - and the morning's insecurities flare back up. Ben moves his hand to push lightly at his shoulders. George falls back immediately.

The only illumination comes from the light in the kitchen, and it's just enough for Ben to read the confusion that lays over a slightly sheepish expression. Ben pushes the shirt back down and clears his throat, already feeling himself go pink.

"I'm sorry," George starts and Ben shakes his head.

"No, no, I mean... I just," Ben pauses, and tugs at the edge of his shirt, "we don't have a lot of time. I don't want to get too far along, y'know. The last thing I want to happen is for Gilbert to show up right in the middle of it and I can't hide a hard-on in these pants and you, well, you're good."

He huffs half a laugh and George nods and steps forward. "You're right," he says, quickly, hands hovering questioningly along the edge of Ben's shirt. Ben nods and George starts to button it, continuing, "You're right. My mistake, Benjamin, I should have thought it through more."

He lets the last couple buttons stay unbuttoned and smooths his hand over his chest, right up to his collar. He thumbs over a bruise, sucked there just a night ago while Ben writhed in George's lap. Ben snatches George's hand before he can take it away and presses it to his cheek.

“It’s fine,” he promises, stepping forward and letting his other arm wrap around George’s waist to pull him closer. “After the market? Gilbert and Adrienne are going up to DC pretty soon after, suit fitting and dress shopping for the wedding. No one to interrupt.”

“I have plans for tonight,” George says, but he doesn’t pull back. Instead he thumbs along Ben’s cheekbone and Ben can feel the confusion bubbling on his features. Plans?

George doesn’t go out, he stays home. What *plans* could he possibly have?

“I meant for us.”

“Oh.” They haven’t actually had a real date. They’d have dinner, or hang out and garden together but nothing different from before and Ben can’t lie and say he hasn’t wanted it. There’s that aspect that he’s missed, just as much as he’s missed the intimacy of lying next to someone in bed, or kissing or touching, he misses being romantic. He misses surprise dinners and stunning nights in the city where everything seems to be right. He misses being unafraid, he misses holding hands on street corners and kissing in bar corners and letting sneers roll off their backs like water off of rocks.

He misses all the dinners and the look on Nate’s face lit up by soft candlelight.

It realization hits him straight to the gut. He shakes it off as best he can, and George has the conflicted, strange look back on his face again.

“If you don’t want to,” George says, hesitating the rest of what he wants to say but Ben shakes his head again.

“I want to, a lot, actually. I just, uh, what are you thinking?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise, but if you’d like to know then-”

“No!” Ben let's go and reaches out to gesture for him to stop. He can’t stop the smile from curling across his lips, even as the roar of the engine in the distance cuts through their quiet. “I want it to be a surprise. I do.”

They’ve got just a few moments left and Ben isn’t about to let them go to waste. He glances back over his shoulder towards the door as the noise grows.

He looks back at George, “Well?”

Ben grins as George gets the point quickly and sweeps Ben into another desperate kiss. He parts his lips immediately into it, getting as much out of it as he can. Though, as he presses into it, he can’t deny that George is one hell of a talented kisser. Hands steadied on his hips, tongue slipping past Ben’s lips until the engine cuts out and the door comes out to meet Ben’s back with a hard thump.

“Ah! My mistake,” comes the too-chipper-for-four-in-the-morning voice behind the door. George steps back. Ben clears his voice and opens the door and Gilbert waves. “Good morning! Are you ready to go? Adrienne is still in the car.”

George gives him a stiff-lipped nod and Ben tamps down the blush that threatens to creep up the back of his neck.

They make it almost to the end of the market without incident. Some people give Ben side-eyes as Adrienne weighs produce and gives her best customer-service smile, others say they’re glad to see him again and wondered why he wasn’t around town as much. Maria brings honey again and

everything feels like it's slipping towards normal.

But it doesn't last.

He doesn't see Bradford first this time. Instead, he hears him with that same thickly accented voice curling around an insulting sneer, "I thought you'd taken off months ago."

This time, he's got people with him. Cruel eyes, curled lips - Ben knows that look. That look like there's slurs right behind their tongues and their hands already curled in fists.

"Sorry, I still live here, Bradford," Ben deadpans, turning around and busying himself restacking something but he can feel that creep getting close and he whips back around to face him. "And I'm anticipating doing it for a while so why don't you just leave me alone, alright?"

"I wouldn't count on it," Bradford hooks his finger in the collar of Ben's shirt and he flinches back instinctively, the pull exposing the unmistakable hickey. "You and that *pervert* should bail while you still can."

He leaves when Adrienne comes back, her own snarl right over Ben's shoulder.

Ben grits his teeth and clenches his hands at his sides, everything screams to do it again. One punch, right to the jaw again, or maybe knee him in the gut and kick him while he's down. Or even fist his fingers in his hair and slap that smug, shitty face right onto the table. But he doesn't.

Not here. Not now.

Not here. Not now.

Not here. Not now.

Bradford spits at Ben's feet when he leaves.

Not here. Not now.

Adrienne gives Ben's wrist a tug and slowly he uncurls his fist finger by finger. He takes a deep breath and she rubs slow, comforting circles on the inside of his wrist.

"George and I are," he says, weak, his other hand coming up to press at the bruise on his collar. "We're... you know, Adrienne."

"Now I do, and it's okay. I'll give you the talk about hurting him later, right now I want you to breathe."

And he does. And he smiles when Gilbert comes back, and he pushes Bradford to the back of his mind as best he can - but he can hear his taunts echoing in his ears at every little disgusted glance some redneck old man gives him. *You and that pervert should bail while you still can.*

Gilbert and Adrienne direct Ben to unload the last few items from the truck as they leave for D.C., and Ben takes his time, knowing he should tell George about it once he's finished. He knows George is just going to tell him the usual things, that it's going to be fine, that Bradford's full of shit, that nothing's going to happen to them. But that doesn't help him, it doesn't make it that lingering sense of fear and anxiety that's been curled up in the pit of Ben's gut since he first started having wet dreams about Justin Timberlake and Pete Wentz and that kid from his track team with the body built by a God go away.

It's a familiar pain, a familiar rush of fear. It's always been a little too personal, a little too private. He always kept it inside, always bottled it up and pretended it didn't happen.

He's pacing the kitchen, untouched tea he made for himself going cold on the counter.

George appears in the doorway, whatever little half-smile he already had fading rapidly into a pinched, concerned frown. "What's wrong?"

Ben exhales quickly and says, "Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

It isn't convincing but he doesn't care and George doesn't push. Instead he gently guides Ben out the front door, a heavy-looking bag over his shoulder. He doesn't ask questions when he tugs his arm away when the sunlight was too exposing for them to link fingers.

George doesn't ask if Ben's okay again, but the question shifts and lingers around them. He can feel it in every quick breath, in every hesitation George makes. They make small talk and Ben tries to make it comfortable and relaxed again, but the bruise is throbbing with a phantom pain under his collar and he can't leave Bradford's smug, douche-bag smirk behind.

How was the market? Great, tons of people. It was fun.

The weather was nice at least. Yeah, got a little warm but the breeze was nice.

It goes like that until they reach the lake that sits neatly tucked away on George's property and Ben realizes just what George had in mind as he sets the bag down and starts unpacking it. A picnic. It's nothing extravagant, and Ben kneels down beside him -- shooed off everytime he makes an attempt to help set things up. At least until Ben could be useful in laying down the blanket and then watching with a familiar warm spark of fondness as George takes out a bottle of wine and pours Ben out a glass.

It helps him unwind, admittedly, to talk about nothing as the sun creeps steadily towards the horizon. But George isn't dumb. He's quiet and reserved, but he's far from dumb and Ben knows he's been around him long enough to learn the ease of reading his moods just as well as Ben's learned to read his.

"You ran into William Bradford today," he says, matter-of-fact, once the lull in their conversation about small town manners provided room for it.

Ben thoroughly examines his second glass of wine, swirling it a bit and nodding. "I did, yeah."

"And he said something, didn't he."

Ben runs through it all, the hickey, the spitting, the threat - and when he falls silent afterwards he feels thoroughly silly for letting something as common as a redneck homophobe get under his skin. George doesn't fall back to his usual means of comfort, taking Ben's hand or guiding his face up to his own, instead he just sighs and shifts.

There's a moment, and Ben looks up to where George has moved to spread his legs more, patting the inside of his thigh in a universal, *come here*, gesture. Ben hesitates, some anxious chill crawling up his spine and when he looks over his shoulders to reassure himself of their private surroundings, George reminds him, "No one's going to find us, Ben. And if they did, we'd hear them a mile away."

He settles himself between George's legs, letting broad, strong fingers dig into the knotted muscles at his shoulders. This is far from the first time they've done this, sometimes it's George laying out

and Ben pressing his knuckles into the small of his back to work out all his built up tension. Sometimes it's like this. Ben lets his head hang forward, not hiding his pleased little noises whenever George gets him in a spot that's been bothering him for days now.

"You hold all your stress in your shoulders," George tells him, right against his ear, for the hundredth time since they'd started this. It's followed up with a featherlight kiss to the skin behind his ear and a press of George's thumbs that makes Ben's toes curl in his boots.

It's enough to make him forget, for just a little while, how awful people can be. He's boneless against him, George turning him to mush as he urges Ben to another sip of wine, urges him to watch the sunset over the lake, feeling rather pampered.

George's hands shifting from massaging his shoulders instead to pulling Ben flush against him - roving along the plane of his chest and down to his stomach. His touch is just hard enough to assure Ben he's safe here, just delicate enough to leave him wanting more. Ben tilts his head back, peppering kisses along the warm skin of his jaw, then pressing a long, deep one to his lips once George tilts his head to allow for it.

They part once the sun has fully set and one of George's ceaselessly moving hands comes to settle high on Ben's thigh.

"Hey, George?" he asks, eyeing the lake with a sudden idea, "Have you ever been skinny dipping?"

"In general, yes." The answer is pressed to Ben's collar, his head being nudged back more so George can lean over and tug the undershirt out of his way. "In this lake, no. Why? Would you like to?"

Ben smiles, sly, against George's neck and stands up - pulling George's hands off him. He breathes in once, twice - in time with his steps towards the edge of the lake. It's dark enough around them, that Ben doesn't worry too much about George seeing him. But he doesn't turn around to face him, just to be sure, as he unbuttons his shirt and leaves it in a pile in the grass.

The only thing he can muster is a glance over his shoulder, where George is sitting, his mouth hanging open as he watches. His brow furrows and his hands pause at the hem of his undershirt.

"Well?" There's just enough coyness in Ben's voice to knock George back to Earth and he hurries to take off his boots - dropping them where Ben had kicked off his own just a little while previously to curl up better against him. He can't help but smile to himself as he tugs his shirt up over his head, leaving it behind.

His jeans are piled close to the ledge and the water is way colder than he'd thought it would be when he slipped in. The lake isn't too deep, but it's enough that Ben's toes just barely brush the bottom and he can watch George hurry to strip as he leans on the smooth, worn wood of the little dock.

Ben doesn't get too much time to linger on the sight though, before he joins him with just the slightest of splashes. Ben pushes back and kicks away from him and, smirking, crooks a finger towards himself.

Chase me.

And he does.

Ben dashes off to where he knows he wouldn't be able to stand if he tried. The movement warms

him up a little, and he ducks down under the dark ripples they kick up, emerging to see no sign of George. His brow furrows, and he's about to call out for him before warm arms cut through the chill and wrap around Ben's waist to tug him back.

Ben kicks once to turn to face him, wrapping his legs around George's waist with a smooth ease. He kisses George slowly, fingers tangling through his hair. A broad hand moves and hooks under his ass, pulling Ben higher and firmer against him.

"This was a good idea," George mumbles against Ben's lips, and he hums his agreement before kissing him again. And again. And again, this time for much longer, and with his hands wandering down George's chest, down to where the water laps at them and back up again.

George walks them towards a middle ground, his hands roaming over the length of his back, down the rise of his ass, along his legs and then up the plane of his stomach, up and up dragging a wet line up to his neck. When they pull back this time, Ben looks down and around them. The night turned the water an inky black, their skin contrasting pale against it.

"You're beautiful," George tells him, quiet and teetering close to reverent. He feels his cheeks heat just a touch, and George refuses to let him duck his head. "I mean it."

Words that he won't say bubble up on Ben's tongue, and he swallows all of them back and settles, instead, on another long, slow kiss. He can feel George half-hard against him, bumping against Ben's ass with each shift, and his own cock is trapped between them, where there's no doubt that George can feel it pressing against his abdomen.

Ben drags his hands down under the water, settling low on George's abdomen and thumbing just beside the trail of hair he's seen peeking out between his pants and the hem of his shirt. "Can I?" He sounds as breathless and desperate as he feels, and George nods, already moving back towards the shallower end.

He's hot and heavy in Ben's hand once they're there and Ben's grounded on the slick floor of the lake. He feels bigger too and Ben's heart hammers in his throat - he wants to drag him up to shore, kiss him breathless and bite bruises down his chest and stomach and swallow him down. He can only imagine what he would feel like, the head that Ben brushes his thumb against nudging the back of his throat. God, he can't afford to think like this now - but George is making such sweet, half-muffled groans with each slow twist of Ben's wrist.

It doesn't take long once George starts guiding him, *faster, tighter, God, yes, just like that*. Ben mouths along George's collar and switches hands once his starts to cramp, using the other to cup and squeeze his balls. The noise that emanates from George's chest is raw, feral and Ben drinks it in - pushing himself closer and higher to kiss him with everything he has.

George gasps his name against Ben's lips when he comes. He hardly gets a moment to breath before George's hands are back on him, one broad, strong one wrapping around his cock. Ben drops his head and muffles a groan into George's shoulder.

The angle is awkward, especially since Ben knows this must be the first time George has laid hands on a cock that wasn't his own, and just on the wrong side of efficient. Ben bats his hand away after a couple unsteady strokes.

Ben doesn't give George the time to ask the question he knows he wants to and instead turns and presses them back to chest, grabbing George's hand and dragging it back to him.

"That's better," Ben gasps, once he can really feel the drag of George's hand over his length.

“Jesus, so much.”

He mutters soft encouragements and George takes to them with vigor and even with his eyes screwed shut, Ben’s seeing stars.

They don’t linger in the water much afterwards, the chill starting to set in once the post-orgasm heat fades and leaves them shivering. They don’t get dressed immediately afterwards either, the dim of the night serves as an adequate cover as they lie out nude on the blanket, collected clothes in a pile closer and glasses abandoned to take swigs of wine directly from the bottle. Ben lies with his back against George’s chest once more, passing the bottle over his shoulder to him and trades it for a bite off the apple George had found.

“Of course, he told everyone he did it rolling off a runaway tractor,” George mumbles, halfway through the story of Gil’s broken wrist, with a particular fondness in his voice.

“How do you break your wrist doing yoga?”

George shrugs, the movement jostling Ben just a little, “You’ll have to ask him. Though I can’t imagine a scenario in which he’ll give you a concrete answer.”

His laughter echoes too sharply in the trees around them, the creeping shadows matching the chill that sets in and climbs up Ben’s spine. George soothes the shiver from him and whispers warm against his ear. “How about we go back inside?”

Ben nods, feeling suddenly exposed, and even lets George twine his arm around Ben’s waist once they’ve started the slow walk back.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The idea make Ben queasy.

And George asks anyway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ben really can't help but think that things are good. In fact, they're really good. Ben steals a towel once they're back in the farmhouse - and, takes a moment to genuinely contemplate the pros and cons of offering to shower together. There's a faint little twinge of fear in his gut and he immediately shrugs the idea off.

Tonight would be too much, with the soft buzz already fading and being replaced with a shivery feeling of being a little too exposed, even with his clothes back on. If George notices his hesitation, he doesn't say anything, offering up the master shower for first use to Ben. He makes it quick, scrubbing the lake water off his body and out of his hair, and borrows another pair of George's pajama pants to lounge around with him for a little bit. He at least already brought back the clothes he absconded with from December.

He rolls up the ankles just a little before he pads back out. "Thanks for letting me shower here," he says, already curling up on the couch and finding the book he'd left there a few days ago.

"It's no problem." George is already on his way into the bathroom, about as pleased as Ben was to be covered in lake muck. Ben gets through about a chapter and half of *Team of Rivals* before George reappears in the doorway, still wet from the shower.

Ben lifts his legs so George can settle in beside him, draping them right back over his lap as soon as he is seated. One warm hand comes to rest on his knee, thumb rubbing soft circles on the inside and rubbing down the length of his calf.

"We could put on a movie?" George offers, and Ben resists the urge to crinkle his nose. It wasn't as though George's taste in movies was particularly bad, it was just that he tends to get rather invested in the plot of anything, old movies that they've both seen a million times, crappy straight-to-DVD romcoms, documentaries - anything. And he always brushes Ben off whenever he gets a little too squirmy and tries to make a move.

But tonight, not making a move sounds actually... nice. "Weren't you talking about that history of food documentary the other day?"

"It looked interesting."

It ends up droning on in the background, some comforting voice discussing the significance of fire and Ben switches around so he can rest his cheek on George's thigh instead. His eyes start to drift shut just a few minutes in, once the hand raking through his hair hits a steady, even pace. He blinks and the show's halfway over and George shifts under him.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?” He asks, and Ben shakes his head.

“Wasn’t sleeping.”

There’s a warm sound above him, a rare sort of half-chuckle. Ben tries to savor it but it’s gone too soon and the hand comes back to tuck Ben’s hair behind his ear and Ben forgets all about it.

“Of course you weren’t.”

The sound from the TV cuts out sharply and the hand gets taken away - much to Ben’s chagrin. George prods Ben into sitting up, where he promptly yawns into his own shoulder and tries to shake the sleep out of his head. And when that doesn’t work, he rubs at his eyes.

Even through his haze, he can feel the growing tension of the question George is about to ask. And Ben doesn’t want him to ask because the temptation is too much to deny in the moment. There’s a soft, warm bed waiting just beyond the door and it’ll be filled with a solid body and George wouldn’t have to pretend like his joints don’t crack and protest every time he drags himself into Ben’s loft.

But the idea make Ben queasy.

And George asks anyway.

“Why don’t you just stay the night? It’s late and you’re tired.”

Ben bites his lip, suddenly far more alert than he had been just a second ago. He’s aware of the eyes on him, questioning. He’s aware of the fact that he’s refusing to meet George’s eye, that he’s staring at the carpet. He’s aware of Martha, smiling serenely down from her picture on the mantle, her hands wrapped around George’s, the ring that’s still visible on his finger.

There’s a bed just beyond the doorway and Ben’s honestly exhausted down to his bones - but it’s their bed. He can’t shake the thought from his mind, he can’t forget that it was *their* bed. It was the bed they came home to at night, the bed they told each other they loved each other in, the bed they held each other in, the bed they made love in.

How can he lie there too? How can he sit in the same place she did, feeling so deeply like he’s taking something that doesn’t belong to him? How is he supposed to tell George that?

Ben chews on his lip for a second, and stands up, hunching his shoulders a little. “No, no, I should go. Thank you, though.”

He can feel the confusion and uncertainty radiating off George. Ben knows he doesn’t want to push, he knows he doesn’t want to urge him into something he’ll be uncomfortable with. But they’ve spent the night together before, curled in Ben’s loft - George’s arm wrapped snugly around Ben’s waist, holding him to his side. They’d been so comfortable there, sleeping just a little later than they normally would let themselves. Early morning, lazy kisses, sleep-warm bodies shifting and pressing together under the sheets until the inevitability of life outside their bed beckoned.

It wouldn’t be something new, it wouldn’t be anything strange for them by any means. And it isn’t like Ben can pretend like he has any plans for the morning.

George inevitably asks, “Are you alright?”

And Ben doesn’t have a good answer. So instead, he says, “I’m fine.”

But he's always been transparent and George has always been amazing at reading his moods and he doesn't take that lying down. Instead, George straightens his stance and tilts his chin up just a fraction more. It's subtle, but the effect is instantaneous. It strengthens him, giving him a more sure and stern air, the sort that commands respect and attention and Ben forces himself to look away, worrying his lower lip between his teeth once more.

There's a thought, but he doesn't think it'd work - looking up at George, peering through his lashes and putting his hands to work on the waistband of his pajamas. It's tempting to coax him off his train of thought, but he doesn't. Instead he just drags his toe down the line of George's hardwood flooring.

"You can tell me what it is, Ben," George says, voice deceptively soft despite the solidity of his stance. "I won't be upset, but you can't think I hadn't noticed. Ever since that morning, you've been avoiding being here. You're fine in the hall or the kitchen but as soon as we get out here you shut down. You falling asleep was the most open you've been in my home all month, what is going on?"

"I can't, George." He says it too sharply, too hard and when he looks up he can see the faintest edge of a recoil in George's expression. "It's different for me, okay? And I know it's not your fault, and it's not anyone's fault but I can't sit there and feel like I'm-I'm-" Disrespecting her, he wants to finish. He can't sit there and feel like he's invading the space of a woman he's never met, like he's the a piece of an entirely different puzzle shoved in the space where Martha used to be. Not belonging there, but being there anyway.

He sounds broken, for just a moment, when he asks, "You can't?"

"Not." A pause, a breath. "Not here. Not on your couch, not on your bed, not places where you and Martha were. It doesn't feel right, it feels like I'm taking something I shouldn't have."

His gaze softens, but he doesn't drop his posing. Not yet. He lets it linger, while Ben's heart sinks down to settle right at the bottom of his gut.

"Have I said anything to make you think that way?"

"No, you haven't. It's just, it's an invasion, George. Look, I barely survived a year and a half, I don't know how you did eight but I couldn't imagine the idea of sleeping *alone* in our bed - let alone with anyone else. I'm not asking you to change anything, or fix anything, I just need you to know why I can't. I need you to know why I can't stay here. At least not tonight."

George inhales, like he's about to say something. But he doesn't. He swallows around whatever it was and lets his shoulders drop just slightly.

"If you're not comfortable here," he says, slowly, "then at least let me walk you home."

Ben can feel the tension still lingering around them, and as much as he wants to leave this conversation behind and just pretend like he wasn't having a problem - he knows this won't just go away. He's had enough practice handling arguments to know that's exactly the way to let this fester.

So he takes a second, steels the twisting in his gut and says, "No."

Some frustrated, nearly annoyed, look crosses George's features for just a second before he calms it back into his usual stoic demeanor. "Fine. Let me know when you get back, then."

Ben doesn't even let him finish his half-turn back towards his bedroom before he snatches

George's wrist. He could easily break the hold, but he doesn't. He doesn't exactly turn back to face Ben though, either.

"That's not what I meant. I meant, I don't want to leave yet."

George sighs, "You said it was different for you, and it's not. You went through an awful tragedy less than two years ago. Sometimes I can't help but feel as though I'm taking advantage of that. It's not the same, but it's not *different*, Ben. You're worried about being disrespectful to the memory of a woman you never met, I'm concerned about you. I'm concerned that I'm interfering with your mourning process; I'm concerned that even if I'm not doing those, that I'm keeping you in a life you don't want."

Ben's heart sinks down into his stomach and stays rooted there. He hadn't considered that. Or maybe he had, but he thought George was past that, or he thought George hadn't been lingering on the thought for so long. Still, he opens his mouth to say something in response, but no words come out.

Ben can too clearly recall George's eyes hovering on something in the distance - usually in that corner right where Ben can't see when he's up in the loft. He knows what's there, if he thinks about it - it's just been so long since he's thought about it. It's faded into the background of Ben's life enough that it hardly registered as a potential problem.

The picture. Neatly tucked away in a corner of Ben's life where George can see it so easily.

The silence lingers too long, and it seeps into the cracks in Ben's chest, and he has to break it eventually. He shifts his hand, moving from his loose grip on George's hand to twine their fingers together instead. The returning touch is hesitant, but there.

"Will you walk me home?"

They walk in near silence, though it was impossible for them to escape again without the pitiful whining on the other end of the door so they're faced with a steady panting and the four-footed padding beside them. Ben's thankful for it, really. He doesn't know if he can handle perfect quiet right now. It'd be too much, he thinks, too pervasive. So they walk, with the occasional bumps against their legs - hands still clasped between them.

Ben's door comes up too fast, and they linger there. Mopsey paws at the door, obviously hoping they're here to stay, and Ben stands in front of George with the options laid out fairly clearly before him. He wants to invite him in, to wrap up in his arms and his clothes and let George meld to his body while they sleep. He wants to wake up in the morning and forget everything after the lake happened. He wants to wake up to George tracing his cheek with his thumb, sleep-warm gaze watching him sleep.

He wants to say goodnight, he wants to watch George head back home, he wants to squeeze his hand and lock the door behind him. He wants the cold, lonely hardwood floors and the bed that's just too damn big. He wants to wake up with his arms linked around his pillow and listen to the shadows echoing in the corners of his living room. He doesn't want anymore looming trees or the quiet anxiety of the locals. He wants to be alone.

There's a moment between them and George leans up and kisses him once. Softly and slowly.

"It's okay," George says, once they part. "It's okay that it's hard. It's not going to be easy, Ben, but we knew that."

“I know.”

“Goodnight, then.”

““night.”

George leaves, and a stiff breeze cuts through the late-spring heat. Ben locks his door behind him, kicks off his shoes and picks up the picture from his bookshelf. For the first time in a very, very long time, he wishes he had more.

Chapter End Notes

Talk to me on the tumbles

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The walk between the farmhouse and the rented property has never been long for George. Even before that plot was taken up, he was making regular trips to the edges of his property - bringing back armfuls of fresh peaches and cherries, more often than not seeing Martha leaning against the freshly white wooden rail of the porch. She'd grin at him as he came back, quick to take one of the crates from his hands and heave it inside without so much as a bat of her eye.

"Another one?" She would sigh, hands in her hips, once he finished dropping them off, "George, what exactly do you anticipate doing with all these peaches?"

He'd shrug. He'd pick one up, bite into it. Her lips would crack into a smile, and she'd push herself right up to the tips of her toes - hands on his shoulders pulling him down for a syrupy-sweet kiss.

God, he never thought there would be a time when he would stop like he does now, staring at the now grimy paint and not missing those days with the same sickness-inducing intensity as the first morning he came back and realized Martha would never be waiting for him again. He misses them, he misses her.

Mopsey stops, sits down, and yawns.

"You're not a puppy anymore," he sighs, those soft brown eyes watching him, sad and tired, from the ground. "You've got to walk home like the rest of us." The response he gets is a whine and a look back behind them.

Of course.

George feels his jaw tense and his teeth clench and he doesn't continue this one sided conversation. He just keeps walking and, inevitably, Mopsey follows. He follows George up inside, tail hanging as he forgoes any sort of sniff-through of the house and walls directly into the darkness of the bedroom. But George doesn't force himself to go just yet. He stuffs his hands in his pockets and walks through to the living room - taking it in.

There's a picture up there, snapped by Martha, from when George and Gilbert had worked through the morning and afternoon in unreasonable heat - the two of them asleep on a blanket under a tree near the guest house, George on his back and Gilbert's head on his stomach. There's one of Alexander and Gilbert, giving each other rabbit ears, one of Martha and Alexander - dutifully making jams in a welcoming silence.

All he needs to do is glance back over his shoulder, to the kitchen, to let that memory relive itself. Soft country crooning from the radio she always kept on the counter, Alexander's rapt focus on the task at hand, determined to do it right, Martha humming quietly as they worked in perfect tandem. George never got along with Alexander like she did. Hell, she was the first one he let call him *Alex*, not George. They butted heads more than George thinks they should have, leaving Alexander seething in his room and Martha's pinched frown reminding him that he's messed up once more.

She never said it, of course, but George could always feel it - no matter how much she said it was all in his imagination. George was the reason they couldn't have kids of their own. George was the reason she was stuck living on that farm. George was the reason they got married so young, letting

the rumors circulate that it was a shotgun wedding.

He was the one who couldn't make it work with Alexander.

Martha, on the other hand, was - God, he feels his chest tighten and his jaw tense against the burning that grows behind his eyes. She was perfect.

He looks around, and he can still see her in everything. Hanging up decorations come Christmas time or trying her hand at a new pie recipe she picked up from a girl at church. Eight years later, her imprint is everywhere, but slowly he can feel Ben melding into his life, his space.

Instead of Martha, knitting with her tongue between her teeth - he runs his fingers along the back of the couch and his stomach twists up with the memories of Ben's warm, kiss-slick lips sliding against his own, his familiar weight in his lap and his sharp elbows jabbing him whenever he wriggles for a good position.

But Ben doesn't live in his head, George knows he should know better than assuming that Ben sees more than just the watercolor he got him, hanging above the counter to his kitchen and Martha's ghost lingering in every other corner.

It is his fault, though. He clings too much to the past, but God, it hurts without her. Even with Ben there, sometimes it still just hurts. Unconsciously, George's fingers fall to his left hand, twisting his wedding band the pain at the idea of taking it off just a little too much to bear still. Ben had tried to reassure him without actually saying the words, tried to remind him that just as much as George tells Ben to take his time to grief - he should do the same.

Eight years. She's been gone for eight years, and it seems like it was just last night he'd had himself convinced he could live to be a hundred and seven and never love anyone else again. But now in the mornings he gropes the empty space in his bed looking for that sleep-warm body with the flat chest, muscular legs and slight stubble coming in along his jaw. Now he mumbles Ben's name into his pillows, now he still feels that weight of loss when his home is empty, but Ben fits himself so neatly into the void that it's difficult to think he'd ever been aching as much as he is now.

Slowly, he steps forward - careful, measured paces until he's nose to nose with a photograph of Martha, taken just a few weeks after they started dating.

Maybe it's time to move on. Maybe eight years of living in his timeless void is enough. He knows - or at least he hopes - she would want him to move on.

George retreats through his bedroom, into the closet, and finds a framed photograph. Gil had given it to him. At first, George was baffled as to why Gil had given him something like this - but now he thinks he knows, now he thinks it's just some subtle attempt to nudge him towards acceptance. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn't - but now George has it, and now he's willing to do something with it.

###

"That's my face."

Ben had woken up early to give himself enough time to decide if he wanted to go to George's. Because going there meant having to explain himself further, because no matter how much Ben doesn't want to talk about it, he knows George isn't about to let this rest. Not when it's involving their relationship. *Relationship*. The word had made Ben just a little queasy - and that's not even

when he tried to put a name on what George was to him. Boyfriend sounded juvenile, partner sounded too serious but so did significant other. He was left floundering and, after a long, fraught morning of fretting, Ben found himself heading over to George's anyway.

It took him unreasonably long to notice the picture.

But when he did, he stood there. Starting.

"That's me," he says, and he tilts his head to examine it closer. He doesn't actually remember when it was taken and he's positive he wasn't asked, considering how he's not even looking at the camera - but leaning over the plastic table of their farmers market stand, an apple in hand, offering it with a grin to someone the camera doesn't capture. He can't take his eyes off it.

It looks right and wrong all at once. He didn't think he ever let his hair get that long, he didn't think he looked that tan with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He didn't think he smiled like that.

At least not anymore. But the proof is staring him in the face.

George responds, uncharacteristically hesitant, "I can take it down, if it makes you uncomfortable."

"It doesn't," he says a little too fast, "It really, really doesn't. I'm just, I mean, I didn't even know you had this."

"Gilbert gave it to me."

Ben makes a soft hum, and traces his fingers along the glossy wood frame. The floor creaks faintly as George shifts and walks, a tentative hand coming to rest on Ben's hip. It feels like ages that it rests there, warm and firm, and Ben waits with baited breath. He doesn't twitch or flinch or brush him off, he stands perfectly still. Like he's luring a stray cat from the underbrush.

Do it, He silently pleads, *please.*

And George does. Slowly, his arm slinks around Ben's waist pulling them closer together until there's just the faintest brush of warm air over the back of Ben's neck, chasing a shiver down his spine.

"The picture's nice." George doesn't follow it up with a kiss, or a press of his nose against his throat. He just stays there, shifting momentarily to let his grip on Ben stay loose and light - and Ben knows why, he knows it's if he wants to flee in the face of all the memories he's lined up with. But, at least for now, he doesn't. He leans back, just a fraction, against George and drinks in that warm feeling that spreads out from his gut and twines itself so thoroughly around his limbs.

He gives it a moment, then another, and then just one more - basking in it - before he pulls himself away. If George is put off by the way Ben slips from his grasp, it doesn't so much as flicker across his features. Ben's tempted to scoot himself back towards him, twisting around and pulling himself up to the tips of his toes to press a hot kiss right against those lips but the moment's shattered by the insistent squeaking of a rather offended dog wielding the only purchase Ben has ever so viscerally rejected. As if it wasn't had enough to get past, Mopsey takes it upon himself to wriggle between the two and drop the slobbery toy right at Ben's feet.

George keeps his voice softly somber despite the spark of amusement in his eyes. "It seems your services have been requested."

"He just likes me because I let him win."

There's another faint twist of a smile and George pulls fully away - leaving Ben feeling just a few degrees cooler in a very nearly unpleasant way. But he doesn't want to linger on that right now - not with the photograph of him working the stand freshly hung among other, clearly well-loved moments. Without much of a hesitation at all, Ben drops down to his knees and gives the slobber-sticky toy a squeeze.

For all the rest he's had that morning, Ben's pretty sure he goes about fifty rounds for about an hour and a half with Mopsey - until he's got a couple of friendly scratches on his forearms and plenty of drool on his cheeks and by the time they're both done and, he's finally conceded, laying, sprawled across the floor - panting just as hard as the mound of fur at his side.

"What time is it?" He asks, tilting his head back against the floor so he can get a good, if upside-down view of George as he diligently sorts his mail, glasses perched on his nose. It's a good look on him, Ben thinks, and after a moment of careful deliberation, says so.

George doesn't spare him a look up from the table as he hums and half-deadpanned, "So I've been told. It's nearly one, by the way."

Okay, so maybe he'd only been at it for a little over fifteen minutes. He lets himself lie there for just another few seconds before he pushes himself up, grunting under his breath as his lower back twinges in protest. He tries to cover it up with a stretch, but George gives him that wary sort of look that always preludes a short, "*I told you to take it easy.*"

But this time he just lets the look do the talking. This time, George flickers his gaze back to the pile of mail and sets another envelope down in the pile of junk mail - the one beneath it making his brow furrow as Ben slips into the chair closest to him.

"A notice for New Haven Self-Storage?" George mumbles, confused, and Ben feels his heart stutter in his chest as some dark, rumbling cloud overtakes his face and that looming, terrifying feeling that he's forgotten something invades into his bloodstream. George turns it over in his hands once, and Ben opens his mouth to say something but the words are frozen and the early summer heat feels like ice water dripping down his spine.

It's only a moment before George realizes the name on it isn't his, but it feels like a decade or a century or maybe just seven lifetimes stitched together haphazardly.

He sets it down in front of Ben and he reads, stamped in big, red letters across the top: *FINAL NOTICE*.

When Ben was eight, Sam had dared him to jump off the swings at the park just a block or two from the church. He hadn't wanted to, but the taunting and teasing from his thirteen year old brother goaded him until Ben didn't have much of a choice. Sam told him it was the only way to be cool and, for eight-year-old Ben, Sam's approval was the world.

There was a moment - right at the peak of his jump, where Ben felt that constant flip-flop of his stomach still and the whole world sunk into a moment that wrapped him up in a euphoric moment of thinking, *I did it!* But then the churning returned when the age-old adage, what goes up must come down, inevitably came true.

For a moment, sitting at George's kitchen table, staring numbly at the paper placed before him, somewhere in the back of his head, he can still hear Sam shouting his name. He can still feel that detached pain and hear the distant *crack* of his arm. It's the same dizzying confusion, the same slow motion as Ben's mind struggles to catch up with what's happening. He feels himself standing up before he knows it's happening, his hands grappling for his wallet and fumbling for his credit

card. The expiration date stares innocently up at him. April, 2017.

April.

His card expired two months ago and he hadn't noticed - he hadn't thought about that, he hadn't thought about the unit, he hadn't thought about *anything* in what feels like forever. It's just been George. All he thinks about, now. Every morning he thinks about what time he can waltz on over and see George, every moment they're apart he thinks about how to fix that, every time he's working the farm he's counting down hours until George breezes back into his life. It's all he wants, it's all he's wanted and somehow he let months - literal *months* - slip past him.

When he opens the letter, he barely needs to skim it.

If he doesn't pick up the things, they'll auction them.

George guides him back to the chair. If he's talking Ben doesn't hear it - he can't focus on anything but the nausea flooding him. He's going to pass out. He's going to be sick. He's going to... He's going to...

... He doesn't know what he should *do*. He doesn't know what he needs to do, he doesn't - he just doesn't know.

There's a knot growing in his throat that he can't quite swallow. But George takes his hand anyway, both of his warm palms clasping Ben's.

"I don't..."

"I know, I know."

"I have to..." Ben inhales sharply, the words trying to fit themselves together in his mind and it can't quite get them to mesh and meld the way they should but it doesn't matter because George answers anyway:

"I'll go with you."

Chapter End Notes

I just want everyone to know that my messages and my inbox is always open. I love all of you very much.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They leave Saturday morning, under the dreary mask of daybreak, only after Ben's been assured perhaps too many times by Gilbert and Adrienne that they lasted years without him and could in fact continue to do such for a few days.

Mopsey's more than content staying with them in the meantime and, with a pair of bags tossed behind their seats there's little more to do than curl up in the passenger side of George's truck and stare at the trees. Ben doesn't make conversation; he wants to, or at least he thinks he wants to, but George doesn't make him either way. He doesn't turn the radio on, he doesn't point out that this is most obviously the farthest George has been from his home in almost a decade. He doesn't do anything but drive.

Ben had tried to convince George not to come. He'd tried to insist that he was fine, tried to insist that all would be well and it really wasn't that bad and George shouldn't feel obligated - but George broke down every argument Ben had against it with one, simple question: "Do you want to go alone?"

It wasn't said accusingly, but Ben felt the staggering blow all the same.

Ten months ago, he would have said yes. Two days ago, he shook his head and let George wrap him up in his arms.

Ten months ago, Ben would know the exact month, year, date and hour - constantly counting down how long it's been since his life collapsed in on itself at the intersection of Bradley and State. Two days ago, he lost two months worth of time because too wrapped up in kissing another man.

He'd booked a room with one bed without thinking, without even passing the idea off to George (who, as it turned out, didn't mind in the slightest) and it wasn't until he hung up that he realized he'd done it.

It's all too absurd, it's all too... fresh and new and old and comforting all at the same time like some disgusting ball of emotions too twisted up to sort out which string leads where. Its tempting to slice through the whole damn thing, halve the Gordian knot that sits tangled up in his gut with one swift blow and try to figure it out from there. But George gives him time to figure it out without the prelude of rashness. He gives him through Virginia, he gives through Maryland and right into the very edge of Delaware before he so much as makes a move.

And that move is to reach across the center and softly take the hand that Ben's left curled around the edge of the seat.

Ben spares a look for the first time in the last 250 miles, only to find George's focus tightly fixated on the road ahead. He clears his throat in the suddenly stark silence of the cab and asks, "Do you want me to drive for a bit?"

"That isn't necessary." He isn't short or clipped but he succeeds in making Ben want to curl himself in more.

So instead he tries to lay out their plans again. "It'll be a little past noon when we get there, if the traffic stays about the same so I was thinking we could grab some lunch after we check in to the

hotel - it'll give us most of the afternoon, I can show you around if you want."

George gives an agreeable hum as Ben slips into talking more - how tomorrow they need to be at the storage center early, sort through the things Ben shoved in there a year ago, figure out what Ben's going to do with all of it. Then Ben has a chunk of time carved out for nearly everything he needs to do while in New Haven, all neatly planned and replanned and re-replanned in his mind until he's whittled away at every conceivable moment of time.

He even plugged in time for Anna, Selah and Caleb and made sure to have Adrienne trim his hair before he left.

Evidently sensing his tension, George gives Ben's hand a squeeze and reminds him, "We'll have time for everything you need. If we need to stay longer, then we will."

"We should be fine just a few days."

At least if everything went according to plan, and it seemed like it was headed to. Ben flicked on the radio after the conversation died out and rested his head back against the window.

They reached the hotel a little before Ben thought they would, even with a stop in Jersey to stretch their legs and let Ben convince George to let him drive the rest of the way and Ben slipped out to check in while George found a place to park.

The woman behind the desk was locked in what looked like an endless discussion about damage costs to a (if the strained expression on her face was any indication) fairly irate customer.

"I'll be with you in just a moment, sir," she manages, giving Ben a smile that can only be described as pleading. He held up a dismissive hand, and opted to look around instead of just watching her struggle. The place was nice, a little too open for the tastes he seems to have acquired over the years. The only bustle seemed to come from a singular party, walking in huddles, talking in alternates between hushed and loud. Ben puts his money on wedding and shifts the strap on his bag from shoulder to shoulder and tries to ignore everything around him.

It doesn't work.

There's loud whispering behind him that makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up, followed swiftly by a voice that he almost remembers half-hesitantly asking, "Mr. Tallmadge?"

He can't brush it off and pretend like he didn't hear, even if he really, really wants to. He's already half-turned by the time he realizes exactly what he's reacting to and by then, it's game over. There's a couple behind him, grinning matching disbelieving, suddenly-stricken grins and it takes him too long to realize he knows both of them. Though the last time he saw either of them, they were awkward, gangly things trying not to trip over graduation robes. They in one of his first senior classes,

"Maria, Frederick," he greets, plastering on a smile that only feels a fraction forced despite that strange, foreign feeling in his stomach, "Fancy seeing you two here."

Maria, the one who evidently called his name, is the first one to step forward, pushing herself up on one foot to give him a quick hug. He fumbles for a moment before he returns it, with a quick pat to her back before she pulls back and Ben already knows the trajectory of this conversation. He steels himself for the next thing she says, but she doesn't mention Nate.

Instead, she gives him that same watery smile everyone else had, and says, "I started my student teaching gig at Beecher High School, I couldn't believe you weren't working there anymore!"

Ben clears his throat and shifts his bag, eyes shifting to the entrance right as George slips through the glass doors. He bites back the panic and shrugs one shoulder, "I needed something new - but gosh, Maria! Student teaching already? You two only graduated what, two years ago?"

Fred sweeps an arm around Maria with a much more relaxed twitch of his lips. "Try four, Mr. T."

He waves a dismissive hand at that, as if trying to ward away some of the residual awkwardness. "Please, you're real adults now just Ben is fine. What's brings you guys here anyway?"

She just points to the gaggle of people now loudly arguing about restaurants behind him, and that grin shakes on her lips. Ah. Ben shoots Fred a sympathetic look, letting him give Maria a reassuring squeeze.

"Lots of people," Ben observes.

"For the wedding."

There's a little spark at being right in Ben's gut - it's just the sort of disarray he remembers from the days leading up to Sam's big day. "Well whoever's getting married, give them my congratulations, okay?"

Now he's getting a funny look from both of them and he realizes why far, far too late. But Maria raises her hand wiggling her fingers to show off the silver band. "We are."

There's a million things Ben wants to say:

But you're so young - but you were just in my class - but he used to throw wadded up balls of paper at the back of your head - but what happened to the last four years?

What he says is: "Congratulations!" Maria bounces on her heels, and Fred's already gesturing something towards the distant family by the time George slips in beside Ben. He can already feel his nerves start to settle, just having him hover behind him. Not touching him, but being there. And suddenly - the mood of the two shifts. Not into something malicious or unkind - but different.

Ben stumbles over his introduction. "Right, sorry, this is George. He's - well - he's a, uh." His tongue slips over the words and he wets his lips after a moment of pathetic fumbling that feels like decades. His students never knew about Nate - at least not to the extent of their relationship and Ben was fine with that. He was perfectly fine keeping his personal life and private life separate - hell, he's pretty sure it wasn't even until he left that most of his co-workers knew.

He can't say it here, he can't say it for the first time in front of two kids that George hasn't met once in his life.

But George swoops in anyway. "I'm a friend of Ben's from Virginia."

Ben just prays quietly that the woman behind the counter doesn't chip in and ask if Ben's sure it's a one-bed room he wants. George doesn't escape without a litany of questions and greetings - but it's soon enough though, the insistent family calls tug the two away and Ben's left breathing hard through his nose while George quietly finishes the check-in, only prodding Ben when he needs to produce his ID.

There's nothing to say by the time he drops his duffel in the doorway of their cramped hotel room. All Ben can think to do is cross the threshold and rub his hand over his face. He wants to shower, he wants to sleep, he wants to curl up and never talk to another human again.

“That was...” George trails off, gently shutting the door behind him. Ben sits on the edge of the bed, but it takes a second for him to summon the willpower to glance up at him. He’d been looking the faintest bit discomfited after they left Virginia, but now he’s practically green. He clears his throat and sets his own bag down, finished belatedly, “Quite a bit.”

“She always has been. I’m just hoping it’s the only weird run-in I have here. The last thing I want to do is run into anymore students or, God forbid, co-workers.” The thought of it makes him queasy, but Ben can at least rest easy on the fact that last he checked, his parents still lived in Setauket and his brother was in South Carolina.

The bed dips as George joins him, a hand snaking down to catch Ben’s own with a soft hum of agreement.

“When was the last time you left Virginia?” He asks, shifting the few centimeters over to lean his cheek on the edge of George’s shoulder.

There’s a part of Ben that doesn’t want to know the answer. Already too guilty at drawing him away from the confines of his home, it might just be too much to know just how far George is clearly willing to reach for him.

Whether Ben wants to hear it or not, George answers. “Ten, maybe eleven, years.”

He shuts his eyes for a moment. He can’t imagine someone doing this for him, and yet here George is, sitting beside him and rubbing his thumb along the back of his knuckles. George is doing this for him. George is here for him, George left his home state for the first time in a *decade*, for him. And it just slips past Ben’s comprehension - he can’t think of a single thing he’s done to deserve this and some distant, hysterical part of him points out, they haven’t even properly fucked yet.

All contact was restricted by clothing or the night in the river. There’s no precedent for this. He and Nate had been banging before they were dating, and before that his relationships were short flings with girls that Ben had just hoped he’d eventually become attracted to. And Later Ben can decide if this was a terrible idea or a terrific one, but he tilts his head up softly and presses his lips to the stubble along George’s jaw.

Then down his neck, mouthing his way to his collar and back up - hands coming to George’s shoulders to pull him more sideways.

George catches on relatively quickly. “Ben,” he warns, in that painfully soft, warm, beautiful voice of his. His response is only to catch his lips in a hot, desperate kiss. George doesn’t protest, instead he grapples for Ben’s back letting him clamber closer without fear of tumbling off the edge. He catches George’s lower lip with his teeth, and the quiet, reserved gasp that greets him nearly makes Ben shiver. But George catches him next, one hand cradling the back of his head as he slips his tongue past his lips.

It’s languid, it’s indulgent.

When the part, Ben takes the breath they share to slip down to his knees in front of George, settling between his legs and letting his hands run over jean-clad thighs. He feels George flex and tense under his fingertips and he has to - he needs to look up. George is staring back down at him; for a rare moment in their privacy, his emotions are so clearly splayed across his features. Confusion, confliction. Ben leans in, and kisses the inside of his knee.

“I want to,” Ben assures to the silent question that he knows George so desperately wants to ask. “I

really do.” He kisses him again, higher this time, and George allows his legs to fall farther apart to accommodate.

He goes for his belt, then his fly, then he’s nosing at that trail of hair, breathing in George’s skin and feeling the warmth that seeps from him before he peppers a few more quick, light kisses. He uses one hand to knead George’s growing bulge and the other to tug at the waistband of his boxers.

George breathes in sharply above him and a quick glance to the side confirms that tension, with his hands twisting and untwisting in the sheets. Ben takes the hand busy at George’s groin and wraps his fingers carefully around George’s palm. He releases his vice-grip on his sheets with just a faint tug, letting Ben slip his fingers into the gaps. His fingers are longer than George’s, but far more slender - and yet despite the vast difference in nearly every aspect (Ben’s wrist is delicate where George’s is thick, his palm small where George’s is wide) they slot together perfectly.

The angle is slightly odd, but Ben manages to slide his hand down to brush his fingers against the base of George’s shaft. He feels the twitch at the first contact and gives George’s hand a parting, comforting squeeze so that he can work on stroking up and down the line of his thigh once more.

Ben peers up through his lashes, asking, “If you don’t want me to do this, that’s fine, George.”

A hand comes to his cheek, cupping it and stroking a calloused thumb across his cheekbone. George looks absolutely gorgeous. The angle Ben’s put himself in highlights the sharpness of his cheekbones and the square set of his jaw and really, he thinks he ought to be down here more often.

The thumb on his cheek drops to his lower lip, brushing along the slightly-chapped skin painfully gently. Ben kisses it, and the faintest smile curls in the corner of George’s lips.

“I want to,” he says and Ben returns to peeling away the clothing that traps him.

Needless to say, he is far from disappointed. The face he’s making can’t be attractive, he’s sure, but he can’t fight down the eager affection and desire that boils through him when he finally pulls George’s cock from his jeans. He’s as big as Ben had anticipated, thicker, even, curving slightly towards his stomach. That spark of need and want from the lake comes back with all the force of a wildfire.

He doesn’t wait and comment, instead he looks back up to where George is stiffly looking at the stucco ceiling and presses the flat of his tongue against the head of George’s cock, giving him a slow, luxurious lick. And then another, and another. His body reacts to each one in small twitches and jumps, and Ben ignores the aching of his own crotch to fully wrap a hand around George and give him a few strokes.

It’s been a while, but Ben falls into the motions easily - learning what George likes (hollow-cheeked sucks, Ben’s tongue flat against the head) and what he doesn’t like (too firm of Ben’s mouth or hand on his balls) as quick as he can. They fall into a rhythm, as Ben sinks down as much as he can, his hand covering the rest as George’s comes to rest on the back of Ben’s head. He doesn’t push him, doesn’t tangle his fingers in his hair and pull - he just cradles the back of Ben’s skull and groans that low, rumbling groan that Ben can feel more than he can hear. When his breathing picks up, Ben shifts to move faster, suck harder, despite the faint ache in his jaw, the burn at the corner of his lips and the spit that starts to dribble down his chin.

“Jesus Christ.” He hears it above him, strangled and strained on the force of George’s heavy, desperate breathing. Ben reaches to softly cup his balls, stroking them more than squeezing them and another noise tears itself from George’s chest.

He's close. George murmurs out a warning, but Ben doesn't pull himself up.

Instead, he redoubles his efforts until George comes with a shuddering groan while Ben swallows around him until he's gone soft. He's never been fond of the taste, but years of being too lazy to get up and spit into the sink or find a tissue to clean himself off or a sink to wash his hands right after they've finished have gotten him fairly accustomed to it. He swallows without so much as a grimace and wipes the spit off his chin with the back of his hand.

"Good?" His voice is hoarse and clearing his throat doesn't help much so he gives up. He isn't sure why, but he doesn't expect George to curl his fingers under Ben's jaw and pull him up and kiss him. Deep and heavy, pushing his tongue into Ben's mouth without hesitation. He pulls back after a moment, face twisting down.

Ben's laugh feels more watery than it should, but George doesn't mention it, instead he just kisses him again, and again. This time shallowly, but still as perfectly needy. Ben bats away all attempts to get into his pants pushing George onto his back to nuzzle up under his neck.

They lay there for a few minutes, George's hand finally settling on the small of Ben's back as he accepts that Ben's own hardon is going to go ignored for now. "We should order food instead," Ben mumbles into George's neck, letting his eyes slip closed. George grunts in affirmation and cards his fingers through Ben's hair.

"Thank you for coming with me," he says after another long lingering silence, "really." There's a long list of things he wants to add onto it. How he knows it couldn't have been easy, how he didn't have to, how it means more to Ben than George probably realizes.

"Do you still want to go there alone?"

He thinks on it for a moment and then, sincerely, nods against George's chest.

Warm lips brush the top of his head, lingering too long to be just a kiss. And, for just a moment, Ben feels perfectly safe.

Chapter End Notes

- The Real Benjamin Tallmadge's kids were William Smith Tallmadge; Henry Floyd Tallmadge; Maria Jones Cushman; Benjamin Tallmadge, III; Frederick Augustus Tallmadge; Harriet Wadsworth Delafield; George Washington Tallmadge.

I'm here on the [Tumblr](#) to talk to people about anything still! I love chatting about stuff! Swing into my messages, my inbox, send me a postcard, idc

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ben wakes up with a start the next morning, his heart racing and his blood pounding so hard it's making his head throb. He tries to calm his breathing from the panicked, terrified pants, covering his mouth with one hand in a desperate attempt to not wake George up.

Shit. He glances over as soon as he thinks about George's, but the man just snuffles into the pillow and buries his face deeper. Ben peels himself out of the bed, and skitters away as quickly as he can as the bile rises in his throat and his stomach churns around their take-out from that place a few blocks down that apparently replaced the Italian joint Ben and Nate frequented more than they should have. Ben makes it to the bathroom before he retches twice and then, with the fading memory of that seemingly unyielding happiness yanked away, pukes.

Somehow, the tossing and turning didn't wake up George but that does. There's a groan, a grunt and then deceptively light footsteps as he crosses the miniscule room. George flicks on the light as Ben tries to hide another sick gag and wordlessly crouches beside him. A warm hand lands on his back, rubbing circles through his thin t-shirt with a practiced ease as Ben dry-heaves until his abs hurt. He doesn't say a word, doesn't hum or hush, he just waits until Ben sits back on his haunches before he takes his hand back.

"I'll get you some water," George says and Ben wants to tell him he doesn't need to but instead he scrubs away the tears that collected and lays his cheek on the cool porcelain. George slips through the door that divides the sink and vanity from the toilet and shower, leaving Ben to close his eyes and just listen for the rushing water and familiar footsteps.

"I just had," he stops, his voice sounding raw around another angry flop of his stomach. He knows what he's about to say. The words sit on his tongue and he knows he should say one of them - he had a dream, a nightmare, an awful, vivid hallucination.

He hesitates long enough for fingers to comb through sweat-matted, sorta greasy hair.

"Do you want to talk about it?" George asks and Ben thinks, lifting his head up from the seat.

His ears prick for the forgotten music that Ben can't recall and his skin aches for the hands he can't remember the feeling of and the words whispering in a voice he wishes he could remember. He can still feel the ghost of the words on his own lips, repeated back: "*I do.*" Slowly, Ben shakes his head and George shifts to sit down on the linoleum beside him, holding the glass out. Ben takes it but doesn't drink.

They're silent for a while, enough time for Ben to slowly re-adjust himself to his own body. His head hurts, his stomach hurts, his throat hurts - a steady throb that brings him back down with each pulse. He breathes in once through his nose, then out. His mouth tastes disgusting, which makes drinking the way George insists a little more difficult than it should have been. He crinkles his nose and taps his fingers against the glass. It was only a dream.

Only a dream.

"It was a dream," he says, quietly, to a crack in the floor.

Above him, George replies, "We don't have to go today, you know. We can call the center, ask

them if we can come empty it out tomorrow and turn in the keys.” It’s a good thought, but the idea of pushing this back makes Ben queasy again. So instead, he just tiptoes around it, scooting closer and closer until George gets the idea and wraps his arms around him, resting his cheek on the top of Ben’s head.

He knows they can only sit like this for so long, before George’s knees and back start to ache and Ben’s too overcome with worry for his joints. But he can enjoy it, if not just for a second.

“I tried not to wake you up. Sorry.”

George just makes a noise above him, shifting so he can bury his nose in Ben’s messy hair. He takes a second, and then two, and then what feels like a few hours before he pulls back, arms loosening from their tight, vice-like grip. “It’s fine, I’ve gotten very accustomed to waking up to someone being sick.”

He’s about to ask what George means when it hits him with all the force of a cold baseball bat to the gut. Martha. He opens his mouth to say something, anything, but he shuts it instead and pulls himself from George’s grasp and stands on remarkably stable feet. He finds his toothbrush and rummages around for the tube of toothpaste he brought to scrub out the acidic taste of vomit while George grunts himself up from the floor.

There’s a stiff, rare sort of silence that weighs between them while Ben sticks his head under the faucet to rinse his mouth out.

“I’m going to take a shower,” George announces, sounding more than a little bit forced to Ben - who just barely manages to remember to spit out the water in his mouth before he tries to talk.

“You’re not going back to sleep?”

“We can get an early start, get breakfast - if you think you can stomach it - and then we’ll have all day to handle the storage.”

Ben pauses, loading up his toothbrush for the second time to try to finish the job, and looks past the door and towards the windows. There’s a sliver of faint dawn starting to peek through the curtains and his stomach twists up again as he fixates his eyes back onto the sink - little bits of white-blue froth still sticking to the basin. It’s earlier than he thought it would be, closer to having to face that room of memories that he tried already to forget.

He clears his throat once, then twice, and a third time for good measure before he answers, “Sounds good,” to the door that’s been nudged nearly closed. It’s difficult to ignore the strain, and Ben knows, he really knows, that it’s his fault. He was the one who couldn’t handle George’s living room and the echoes of his past, he was the one who closed himself off the moment Nate’s memory was forced back into his life. He was the one who can’t bring himself to twist around in George’s grasp and kiss him and say it’s something incredible - how much he *cares*, that he’d train himself to wake up to someone else’s discomfort.

He stares at the door, worrying his lower lip for a few minutes before he steps towards it. Slowly, he toes it open, the steam almost obscuring the shift of the body behind the frosted glass doors. There’s a pile of clothes that Ben neatly steps over as he tugs his shirt over his head, as silent as he can be.

If George’s noticed him, he doesn’t say a word. Not when Ben’s shirt, the pants, then underwear hits the ground. Not when Ben slides the door open just enough to slip into the dimly lit little cubicle.

He stands there for a moment, admiring the way George's back looks framed by the rivulets curling down his body. The way he flexes when he reaches for the little bottle of travel body wash because he didn't grab his own from his bag. Slowly, as if drawn to him by some magnetic force, Ben steps forward and reaches out, feeling George stiffen the moment his fingertips brush the skin of his arm.

"Ben," he sighs, like a tired, worn-down warning. His shoulders sag and his head bows and Ben's stomach twists itself up into knots. He swallows, thick, and slowly wraps both arms around George's middle, pressing his cheek to the space between his shoulderblades.

He sits there for a second, then a few more, before he shifts to rest his forehead there instead, not letting him go. "Thank you," he whispers, hardly audible, above the shower spray. The words get stuck for a second, wrapped around the lump in his throat that refuses to move no matter how many times he tries to choke it down, "for coming with me. I don't think I could do this without you."

George's hand covers Ben's own, and for a moment he's absolutely terrified he's going to pull him off. So he tightens his grip, pulling himself closer against him and feeling the words he really doesn't want to say like this sit on the tip of his tongue like a long-lost prayer.

Instead, though, George just squeezes them. Long and firm and sincere.

He feels George breathe deeply, and Ben is absolutely positive his cheeks are so wet because of the shower. They stay like that for a little while longer, before George turns to face him and Ben swipes the shampoo from the ledge and pushes himself up to his absolute tip-toes to lather it into George's hair. He hunches down and steals his a kiss, chaste and sweet as Ben gives it his absolute all to not get soap in his eyes. He lets George rinse it himself, lets his hands sweep around to his back and drag Ben to his chest.

"I know I've been a prick recently," he admits once they're both clean and still just lingering under the spray. "I just don't know how to handle all this, I don't know what I'm going to do in a few hours, I don't know how I got so - so caught up in all of this."

"All of this?" George's fingers curl through Ben's wet hair, rubbing the pads of his fingers against his temple as Ben lays his head on his chest. "You mean us?"

"Don't take it like that, please." He pulls himself away from the grasp, reaching behind them to turn the water off. "I didn't mean it like that, I mean - I didn't think it would happen again, I *never* thought it would happen again, but it did. I got so caught up in us that nothing else mattered anymore, and I didn't - fuck, I sound like an asshole." He cuts himself off to grab a towel, wrapping it around his waist with a scowl.

"I understand what you mean." George follows suit, though on him it looks a little more obscene and Ben wishes he wasn't too frustrated to admire the sight.

"You do?" Ben's glad it doesn't come out as condescending - but as exhausted and nearly relieved as he feels.

When he glances back over his shoulder, George has that hardened steel expression again. The one with his jaw tight and his lips curled faintly down. "I married the woman I was in love with since I was sixteen, Benjamin, I wasn't under the impression that there was anyone else in the world I could," he stops, that muscle in his jaw jumping before he finishes, "anyone else I could let into my life. I'm here to help you, but only if you let me."

"I'm... trying."

"I know you are, and you're doing so much better than I was, and this," George pauses to gesture with the hand not currently holding up his towel, "is a big step. A tremendous one, so why don't we get dressed, and go get breakfast and take this as slowly as we need to?"

Ben presses a kiss to George's shoulder in agreement.

Breakfast turns to a walk around town, which turns to Ben vowing that no matter what he's taking George to Libby's and if he has to climb him to get him to try their Italian ice, he will. It's creeping up on ten by the time Ben finally pulls up directions on his phone, shifting in his seat and trying not to look at the passing buildings. He can too easily remember the last time he was down this road, his shaking hands clenching and unclenching on the steering wheel, his heart pounding and his vision blurred with tears.

He blinks them back now, steadying his shaking breath as George uncharacteristically drops a hand from the wheel and slots their fingers together. "It's okay," he says, quietly, "It's okay."

And Ben believes him. He believes him as much as he can, giving George a soft squeeze back and using his other hand to scrub at the insistent tears welling up. They park at the closest place to pull up - the skies deceptively clear and light as Ben's shaking hands pass over the key, his heart in his throat and his breath already turning sharp. George rolls the gate up.

It's decidedly anti-climactic.

All the boxes are exactly where he left them - or at least he's pretty sure they are. He'd been shoveling them in desperately, relishing in the way his arms ached and his chest throbbed and his lungs burned. He'd been punishing himself, punishing everything around him - he didn't think when he stacked boxes and abandoned everything to the cold starkness of a concrete-and-metal cell.

George tilts his head to a stack of file boxes, "Should we start there? Paperwork is always the easiest."

Ben eyes the box and shakes his head, "I think there's some clothes over here - that might be easier."

"Are you sure?" There's the sort of hesitance in George's voice that makes Ben not want to look back over his shoulder, to where George is glancing between Ben and the file box. He barrels forward, heaving a box off the top of a stack and setting it down.

He explains as he opens it, "They're my clothes."

Once he opens it, however, he thinks he might need more explaining. There's sweaters, scarves, all things he could have used in Virginia, all things in similar shades of deep, dark blues. Ben kneels down and takes the first one off the top - a soft, aged hoodie in a deep navy that's now still too big for him. He thumbs along the sleeves, where they're worn down from constant tugging and the elastics gone loose enough to sag.

His chest seizes as he remembers Nate stealing it off his bed whenever they studied together for their December finals in Ben's cramped dorm room.

George lets him think, lets him debate on their pre-determined piles for what gets kept, what gets donated and what gets thrown away.

Carefully, Ben folds it and sets it aside to be shuffled off to a Goodwill somewhere.

“It’s a nice color on you,” George comments, thumbing along the fabric of a lumpy hand-knit scarf Ben bought at a woman’s aggressive insistence his first winter out of Setauket.

“He thought so too.” The *that’s why they’re here*, goes unsaid as Ben divides the clothing as best he can without choking up. He makes it to the sweater Nate bought him for what he would refer to as their “first adult Christmas,” before he starts to scrub away the tears that roll down his cheeks. It’s soft and well-worn, for years it was Ben’s absolute favorite thing to wear. He knows it must have cost Nate a small fortune - not that he was ever one to blink at a price tag for someone else.

Carefully, Ben folds it, and puts it with the things he wants to keep.

Not much else from that box goes the way of keeping, most ends up to be donated and a few ragged, hole-y shirts are stuffed into a trash bag before George hauls another box to where they’re sorting. He takes the time to scrub at his eyes and tilt his head towards the back.

Ben opens it and fights the urge to immediately shut it and curl himself away in the farthest corner. He runs his fingers along the fabric at the top.

“More clothes,” George observes, and Ben nods, scooping the shirt up in his hands. It’s small, familiar. A dark gray v-neck, always just as soft as it is now.

His voice is a little hoarse when he clarifies, “Nate’s clothes.” He doesn’t know what possesses him to do it, but he runs on a sliver of hope as he lifts the fabric to his face, the touch so familiar and so distant at once and he breathes it in - and immediately drops it back into the box as the stench of dust and age and mothballs invades his senses. He coughs into his elbow, tears springing up into his eyes.

“I don’t know what I expected,” he laughs, a little watery and way too forced. “I just... I wanted...”

The top of the box is folded down as Ben feels that heavy disappointment settling in his gut. He swallows thick around the sob that threatens to rip itself up from his throat. “Just one more time.”

“I know,” George soothes, “I know.”

Ben snuffles a few times, rubbing the back of his hand across his nose and shakes his head. “Donate.”

George moves it for him, and they go through like that slowly - some items Ben can’t pry his fingers off a second time (those half-burned honeysuckle candles Nate adored, a little jar filled with shells and sand from a summer Nate spent in Italy with his sister) and promptly wraps them up and puts them in the cab of the truck.

Everything else accompanies with stories - some that make Ben take shaking, rattled breaths through his tears, something that make him bury his nose in George’s shoulder until the stifled sobs subside. A few, though, are met with a wet sort of laughter; one picture of Nate in particular, as Ben rubs dust off the glass of the frame, breath hitching in a rough chuckle.

He turns it to show it to George, who raises a brow and quirks his lips. “They don’t seem rather fond of each other.”

Ben shakes his head. Nate’s holding Abe - an old friend of Ben’s - newborn son, Thomas. Thomas wails, red-faced and limbs blurry with his angry infant flails and Nate looks on the verge of

horrified tears himself. “He hated babies, which we thought was funny because he taught first grade. He always says,” he trails off for a quiet, hiccuped little hitch in his breath, “he always said he only liked them once they learned to ‘hold their own damn neck up and talk.’ Babies hated him too, always did.”

Carefully, George picks it from Ben’s yielding hands and examines it himself. “Did you ever want children? With him?”

“No,” the answer comes freely, quickly. They’d discussed it, as if a prelude to what Ben figured after must have been the inevitable. A way to make sure they were on the same page. “Neither of us did, I had my classes, he had his, it was more than enough kids between the two of us.”

George hums, turning the frame in his hands over, then asks, “Are you keeping this? I’d like to put it on the wall with the rest of the photos.”

At that, Ben freezes and a whole committee worth of thought surges up and offers their well-meaning opinions. He’s sorting through, trying to figure out which one is the best option when George tacks onto the end: “If you’d like, I mean. I wouldn’t want you to feel forced, especially if you’d like it in your own home.”

But he’s only halfway through the sentence when Ben spews out, “You’d really do that?”

George, looking for a moment slightly taken aback before his features train themselves back to their normal, neutral, setting, says, “Of course.”

Ben tries to imagine it there, Nate hanging next to Alex and Gilbert and Martha and George - forever immortalized against the soft seafoam-grey walls. For a second, he can’t. For a second, it escapes his comprehension that these two worlds could sit neatly next to one another. His old, and his new. Nate and George.

There’s no explicit confirmation, no direct yes or nod of his head, but George puts the picture gently in the truck’s cabin anyway, along with the other delicate items Ben would be devastated were they broken in transit.

Eventually they wheedle down. George tilts his head every few boxes towards the files lying innocuously in the center of a cleared out circle around it. It looks almost quarantined, secluded alone for fear of touching it. Each time George asks, Ben shakes his head until, as he realizes with his heart set firmly in stone at the bottom of his gut, it’s all they have left.

They’d been working for hours, sweat soaks through the back of his shirt, turns his hair a little darker as he pushes it back.

It’s it. It’s all that’s left. Ben sits, cross-legged, on the floor beside it, tugging on of the smaller containers into his lap. George joins him, despite Ben’s protests about his knees and back, sitting right at Ben’s shoulder. Unlike before, he doesn’t take up and box and thumb through the contents with him. He just watches, now, as Ben pulls out a stack of crayon-drawing cards. Most of them have pictures of a stick figure with a broad, single-stroke smile and dark hair scribbled around the head. Sometimes, there’s wings, sometimes there’s a halo, sometimes there’s words: “We Miss You,” or “Good-Bye” written in childish, sharp-edged handwriting across the top. Ben sniffs, and sets them aside. “They thought it’d be good for the kids,” is his only explanation.

George shifts beside him, as if he thinks this is what Ben was avoiding. There’s receipts, old stacks of fill-in-the-blank permission slips, lesson plans, and worksheets stuffed into every folder; he tosses almost all of them.

Okay, he thinks, once there's little more than a Manila envelope and a rubber-banded stack of drawings. He takes a deep breath, and sets the envelope in his lap, fingers toying with the beaten corner. "I should tell you something first and I just, I don't know why I didn't before because it doesn't change anything - about anything, okay?"

George watches him with even eyes and a passive expression, careful not to show that flicker of anxiety Ben's sure he must be feeling.

"It's not bad, it's not... it's just... it never happened, okay? It, it was *going* to but it didn't and I want you to know that I knew it was here and this is why," he pauses to compose himself enough to get it over with.

Everything feels hazy, distant, like Ben is moving through layers of syrup to peel back the top of the envelope. He could deal with shirts and knick knacks and letters and pictures, he could deal with cards, he could deal with memories but this - this is too much. He tips it into his empty palm, the small weight at the bottom shifting and tumbling towards the opening. It's the chance he never had, the future he'll never get, sitting cold in the center of his palm. George stares, that passivity cracking into heartbreak on Ben's behalf.

"Oh," he says, in a voice thick with everything Ben doesn't want to hear. "Oh, Benjamin..."

In the center of Ben's palm, with a line of tiny diamonds sparkling in the late afternoon, sits a small, silver ring.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 23

There's a silence around them, brought about by that little ring. Ben's only worn it once - for a few minutes - right after he found it. He tearfully, numbly, slipped it onto his ring finger and pressed it against his lips. "*I would have said yes,*" he had whispered, rocking back and forth on the floor beside Nate's desk.

I would have said yes.

I would have.

Fingers wrap around his hand and Ben jerks, startled, before he remembers where he is - sitting on the dusty floor of the storage unit. All cleared out except for this. He doesn't drag his hands back or shake George off; he can't even think of doing it. Hell, he'd half convinced himself that maybe it wouldn't even there. That maybe if he closed his eyes, if he pretended like it wasn't there then maybe, maybe it wouldn't be. Maybe it was a figment of grief, something Ben hallucinated through tears and pain. But here it is, solid proof that everything happened.

"Is this why you were avoiding all this?" George asks, blunt as ever. Ben just nods. George continues, "And he didn't ever ask?"

"We were," He pauses, clears his throat when the words come out grainy and distorted, "We were going to go away for a long weekend, when everyone was on fall break. Nate had been acting weird and, uh, he'd been checking everything to make sure it would be good. Weather, traffic, triple-checking the hotel booking. Just to make sure nothing went wrong, at first I thought it was because -" He sniffles this time, and George drops his hand - instead slipping his arms around Ben and pulling him against his chest. He struggles to swallow down a sob, but he can't - he can't lose it like this here.

Not here, not after everything else. Without his permission, his fingers curl around the ring and pull close to his chest, letting him pull himself around it, shoulders tucking in as George shifts to hold him tighter. "We had fought about dumb stuff once or twice on vacation and I thought, I thought he was just trying to avoid another one. But, he..." The rest goes unsaid. Caught up in the sticky mess of jumbled feelings buried in the hollow of his throat. But if the soft, steady fingers rubbing Ben's back are any indication, George gets it.

He isn't sure how long they're there - time getting fuzzy around the edges as a fresh wave of hiccuping, trembling sobs roil in his gut until they're forced up against George's shirt. There's an embarrassingly large damp patch by the time Ben can unfurl his white-knuckled grip and pull himself away. There's absolutely nothing in him that wants to check his watch right now to check how much time he spent steadily burning all the energy he had left on something as pointless as this.

He's fairly certain if he said that, George would just hush him, so he doesn't. Ben pulls himself up, offering the hand not still cradling the ring to George to help him.

"I'm going to keep it," he says, after a minute more of turning it over in his hand, "I don't... I don't know if I'll wear it, but I can't leave it behind again. I just - I can't."

With a featherlight kiss to his temple, and a protective, strong hand on his side, Ben feels... safe. Secure. Understood. He tips his head up, craning to meet him with a soft, lingering kiss. George hums into it, pressing their foreheads together once Ben's gotten his fill. "Let's go," he breathes, no

thick suggestion or innuendo in his voice. He just bumps the side of his nose against Ben's and steals one more, quiet, kiss before pulling apart.

"Yeah," he agrees, hand still curled to his chest, "we're done here."

Ben drops off the keys and pays the late fees himself, only realizing why he was getting such weird looks from the guy collecting once he catches the reflection in the passenger window. His hair is a mess from George's fingers, his eyes are bloodshot and swollen and he looks more or less like he rolled in dust.

George drops off the donations and the garbage for him, instead - giving Ben a few minutes curled up against the worn upholstery, rubbing his thumb along the now-warm metal he's been holding. He can do anything with it, he supposes, but there's only so much he can - well... do. Wearing it is out of the question, and even looking at it burns in the back of his throat with some distant, aggravated memory. Nate's nose pressing into the crook of Ben's neck while he asks him if he wants to go to Delaware during break. Nate's fingers, fitting so neatly between Ben's. Nate, kissing the back of Ben's hand and musing, "Your fingers are way thinner than mine."

Ben had quirked a brow at him, confused for the moment, before he shrugged and admitted, "I guess? I mean I never actually noticed."

Nate held their hands together - fingers splayed - so Ben could see. He was right, Ben's fingers were longer and thinner but not by any considerable amount. He didn't see where the point was until it was far, far too late. Or maybe it was even that, in the moment, there wasn't a point to be made. Nate had used the closeness of their hands to wrap Ben's arm around his own shoulders and burrow into his side, not releasing his hand for a moment once their fingers were clasped.

He was the playfully romantic one - the one who remembered the details and brought them out in as many ways as he could.

Even the ring.

Nate was drawn to big, sweeping gestures. He loved the big and the bold, the thrill of attracting attention with something - but this was simple. Elegant. So painstakingly unlike Nate, something so clearly what Ben would have wanted for himself, what he did want - what he wants.

Suddenly, the empty truck feels far too small. The thickness in Ben's throat doubles - tightening and strangling the air from his lungs as the walls creep closer and closer to him. Too close to the cafe, the street, their apartment, their friends, their schools. Too close to it all - too close to everything, too close to every one.

Too close, too risky.

His nails bite into the meat of his hand but he can't feel it - can't feel anything but the mounting pressure inside and out. Building and building to a devastating peak - he can hear his own breathing too loud and rough and haggard in his own ears. It's only shattered by a dull, distance thunk.

He doesn't know, he can't think what it is - not until a voice grounds out, "Are you alright?"

George's eyes are worried, his lips are curled down into a twist of a frown, his brows furrowed. The echo of Ben's panic is rattling around in his own ears, but - he nods.

"I'm okay, can we just - can we just get back to the hotel?"

The expression doesn't pass, doesn't melt away into something else. It sticks. "Of course," he says,

“Of course.”

Ben tucks himself together in the seat. The drive isn't long or arduous - it's quick and painless and George offers to just drop Ben off at the front but he shakes his head again, opting to help carry in the few items scavenged for good from the cold confines of that storage unit. “Thanks again,” Ben mutters, half-way to the door.

“I wouldn't have made you do this alone, Ben. Especially considering everything in there.”

“I know.”

Ben snakes his free hand down to George's, giving it a faint squeeze. It doesn't escape his notice the way George tenses - the way his eyes flicker around to even the most innocuous form of public affection. For reassurance, Ben squeezes again then releases. He doesn't comment, doesn't remind George that here is different. It's not his tiny no-where town, populated by vitriol, anyone and sure - it wasn't perfect, but it was better.

There's so many things he could say, so many things he could show George about how different it is five-hundred miles north of nowhere - but all those thoughts stutter and stumble and die as Ben catches sight of someone in the lobby. It isn't his students again but what Ben wouldn't give to have that encounter fifteen times over if it meant his eyes weren't seeing this now.

Sitting, with his elbows on his knees and one hand buried in sandy blond hair - his other holding the phone he's scrolling through, is something that, from this distance, and this angle, and in this breath in time, looks shockingly like Sam.

Sam, who Ben hasn't seen since the funeral - lingering in the back, that same twisted, contorted look of indecision he'd had when Ben stormed out of the last family gathering he ever attended. Sam, who didn't say a word that day. Sam, who didn't call. Sam, the compulsive fixer. Sam, who let Ben walk out.

Sam, his brother.

Maybe he can make it to the elevator without him noticing. Maybe Sam's too wrapped up in whatever he's doing to notice. Maybe that's it. Maybe he can sneak past - grinding to a halt in the middle of the hotel lobby, feeling like he is very, very close to vomiting all over the polished floor.

“Ben?” George asks, the worry from before rearing itself up at the worst time possible, and that's enough. Across the room, Sam's head snaps up - eyes fixating immediately on him.

“Not, now,” he whispers, half to himself, “fucking hell, *not now*.”

“Ben, what's wrong?” That rare tell-me-now edge is back in his voice, clipping at the edge of the question.

He'd answer, he really would but before he can even suck in the breath there's a voice he hasn't heard in years just a yard away asking, “Benny-Boy?” Ben doesn't look at him. He looks down at the floor instead, weighing the options of just leaving. Leaving, with Nate's engagement ring in his pocket and George confused in the hotel. Just - leaving. He's pretty sure he knows where the nearest bus stop is, pretty sure he can't get far.

His lips part, move, then press together. He can't - not with George, not with already too much to explain. “George, can you go ahead upstairs? I'll be up in a second.”

The protest is immediate. “Benjamin--”

“Please, George.”

The ice is back in his expression - cool and distance - when Ben looks up at him, trying to convey as much of urgency and pleading that he feels. George breaks immediately, holding out his spare hand. “I’ll take those up for you.” He passes them over, trying not to peek at the desperate sort of relief on Sam’s face.

He watches George’s retreating back, until he’s safely closed behind the elevator doors, before rounding on his brother. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you,” he admits, openly, eyes flickering about to the curious onlookers they’ve gathered, “can we go talk somewhere? Catch up a little?”

The idea of being stared at during a confrontation with his family is bad but Ben can’t will himself to sit across a table from him, to talk to him like everything’s okay. The walls are too close, his breath too rushed. “There’s some benches outside,” he clips, not giving Sam time to argue before he spins on his heels and hurries out. The footfalls beside him the only proof that Sam is following. He waits until he can suck in a few lungfuls outside the confines of the hotel before he finally asks: “How did you know I was here?”

“Brewster called.” Traitor. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Was that a real question? Ben has to take a second, think over all the possible ways he could phrase all the possible reasons he wouldn’t have told Sam he was back in town - but the list is too goddamn long. Sam might’ve told his parents, Sam might not’ve come, or even just the simple fact that this conversation is exactly one of the ones Ben *doesn’t want to have*.

He sits, on the hard edge of the bench, and lets his silence respond for him.

Sam follows suit, though with the same faint sort of half-grunt that often follows George attempting the same thing and Ben’s forced to swallow down the lump of concern that fusses itself to the surface. He pointedly doesn’t look at him - and he knows he’s being petulant. He’s very, very aware of that fact, actually. But he wasn’t the one who showed up, unannounced, after nearly seven years of not speaking.

“The service was nice,” he says, after a moment - and it takes Ben a hiccup of time to realize he means Nate’s. “I don’t know if you saw, I would’ve said something but it didn’t seem right.”

“I did,” he confirms feeling about as stiff and wooden as he sounds. The conversation lapses again and there’s a coldly terrifying moment where he’s sure, *sure*, that Sam’s going to bring up their parents. Bring up that last, bitter, fight, the first and only time Ben shared a single sliver of his life with Nathan - the only time Ben mentioned seeing someone since he came out, the only time he brought up his sexuality again - just to confirm that he’s happy, that he was in love.

In a heartbeat, Ben convinces himself Sam is going to ask why he didn’t come back, why he didn’t try harder, why he shut Sam behind that door too.

He tenses, bracing himself for the blow, when he sees Sam go to speak again - but the thing that shudders through him isn’t another biting accusation, but the weight of his sigh. The resignation.

The heaviness.

There’s a second that Ben sees thirty-three, that he sees the wrinkles and stress lines and speckled gray filtering in. Under that blurring haze that made Ben repeatedly envision that image of his brother at twenty-one whenever he dared to conjure up a memory at all, there’s someone else.

Someone with a career and a family. A wife he adores, a daughter he dotes on.

He runs a hand down his face and clears away the last of that fog.

"I'm sorry, Ben. I get why you didn't but - god, I wish you called, I wish someone called so I could've been there for you. At all, at any time." The words come stilted, awkward but with the sort of sincerity that he knows Sam can't fake and some strange knot of guilt wells up heavy in his intestine again and Ben can't move. His limbs all lock and he can't even tear his eyes away from the side of Sam's face as he runs his fingers through his own hair and rests his elbows on his knees, hunching, looking both older and smaller.

"I know you don't want to talk about it, but all I want to say, *all* I want to say is - there's a lot of things I could've done differently, and I'm just really glad to be able to talk to you, kid. Really."

It takes a second for Ben to properly arrange his thoughts, to shuffle through the pre-packaged responses and move on to something more custom-made for the job. He presses his lips to a thin line, debating if it's really worth it to ask if that's the whole reason Sam's here? He's not here to drag him back home, he's not here to bitch him out for not reaching out, even once?

Ben can't quite suspend his disbelief enough. "Why didn't you call?"

"Wasn't sure you'd pick up. And Brewster wouldn't give me your number."

"Oh." Ben crinkles his nose and the perfectly reasonable and valid excuse - shifting a little in his seat and fidgeting with his fingers. The silence is heavy, difficult to navigate and push around and eventually, Ben figures he's gotta be the one to break it so he asks, as softly and casually as he can make it. "How's the family? Savannah's what? Eight?"

That flips something in Sam, and his lips twitch into a small smile. "Yeah, she's gonna be nine soon - can you believe it?"

Ben shakes his head. The last time he'd seen Sam's daughter she was hardly five hours old. Nestled in the crook of Ben's arm, looking up at him with those massive eyes. He'd congratulated both Sam and his wife, Mary, and quickly tried to pass the newborn off - half-terrified he'd drop her or something. Sam had faith in him though, wanted a picture of Ben holding her.

He didn't have a copy, but he didn't mind.

"What about Mary? Is she still working at the salon?"

"No, she decided to stay home with the kids for a little bit."

He's about to hum his agreement before something new strikes him. Kids. As in plural. As in *more*.

Ben's gotta think back a bit but he's fairly certain Sam's only ever had one - or one that he's met, and surely he would've said something in the beginning about a new one. Ben flounders for an excuse before he asks, "Kids?" Putting an exaggerated emphasis on the 's' in the word.

Sam nods, finally look up at Ben fully. "We've got a two year old now, Benjy and I would've - I meant to tell you but I was too worried how you would respond and well, tis better to ask for forgiveness than permission, right?"

He cocks his head, pretty confused as Sam doesn't bother to ask if Ben wants to see before he starts pulling his phone out and scrolling. "What permission would you even need from me?" Sam doesn't answer right away but he does hand the phone over, letting Ben stare at the little grinning

face - the baby standing in a blue onesie, clinging to his dad's fingers with bitty hands. He's pretty adorable and, once given the OK, Ben flicks through the pictures. Some of him asleep curled up in varying places, some of Savannah grinning big with her golden-blond curls and her arms tight around her brother.

"What's his name?" He asks, passing the phone back.

"That's what I wanted to ask about, I would have called and asked if you were alright with it - because it felt rude to just... do it but, it's Benjamin."

His mind's too sluggish to properly comprehend the information he's just been given. It's Ben.

He wants to ask, what's Ben? What's Ben and why did you need permission and what's your son's name, Sam? He wants to ask a million questions at once - but he can't push the words up and out so he doesn't.

"You named your son," he started, tentatively - hearing his own voice as thick as it is with awe, "after me?"

Sam nods once, slowly, his eyes searching Ben's face as if he's desperate to find some clue as to how Ben feels about it - and Ben is fairly desperate to know how he should feel. Sam, who he hasn't talked to in seven years. Sam, who reached out despite Ben's coldness. Sam, who went the funeral of a man he never met just in case his brother needed him.

Sam, who Ben shut out.

Sam, who named his only son after Ben and was too worried about his reaction to tell him. For an awful, terrible, moment - Ben realizes the mistake he made seven years ago. He expected Sam to wait for Ben to come around, he expected him to push through Ben pushing him away - not to respect the boundaries he set and keep his distance.

He bites his lip for a second, weighing his options. "Sam?"

"Yeah?"

Deep breath, steady nerves. "I'm really goddamn gross but, if you want to wait while I change and grab George - we should grab dinner. The three of us, if, I mean, if you'd like to meet him."

There's a grin that Ben hasn't seen in over half a decade, and Sam claps Ben's shoulder. "I'd love to, kiddo."

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Nathan Hale

Son, Brother, Friend

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry in Advance

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dinner was, against every anxiety and concern and worry that Ben had, almost painless.

He'd offered the briefest of introductions between the two, George giving Ben a raised brow look along the sort of we'll talk about you never mentioning your brother later vein and Sam trying his absolute best to be at ease with this all. They made small talk, as they wandered towards a settled-upon Thai place.

"You know that cafe on Whalley closed?"

"You're kidding, the one with the killer pastries?"

Ben explained that Sam had been the more likely to visit him in college - he worked closer, he lived closer, he could spare a couple hours every week or so to hang out with his baby brother. It stopped, of course, after everything. But Ben didn't bring that up, he'd just let the conversation drift. From the recent closures of things near his childhood home to how Sam recently actually moved to Hartford with his company, to Sam dragging his chair around the table to show George all the baby pictures he has of his kids.

"He's adorable, he looks just like Benjamin," George mused, looking less and less like he'd much rather disappear into the wallpapering.

Sam scoffed at that, swearing, "They're identical, I bet Bender doesn't have any baby pictures to show you but trust me - he's the spitting image of his uncle."

Ben had ignored George mouthing, *Bender?* to him in favor of better studying the menu in his hands. But he knew, he knew, George was compiling a list of every dumb childhood nickname Sam had strung together over the last nearly three decades. The conversation had dwindled down once food arrived, shifting to George for a while on all the usual, vague sorts of topics. What did he do, where did he live, how'd they meet. It was just deep enough that Ben could tell he was trying, and he tried to keep in mind how much that mattered. He was trying, he really was.

"So," he should've known then to check just what can of worms he was about you wrench open

before he finished asking, "Caleb told you where I was but wouldn't give you my number?"

"Pretty sure he just wanted to make sure you'd give him the next one too y'know?"

"I guess I just didn't know you two talked."

It was meant to be shrugged off, for Ben to go back to idly twisting his fork around and pretending like he wasn't too strung out to eat. But Sam just had to pull back on that lid more, even if he didn't know what he was doing.

"We don't, not more than a passing 'like' on Facebook, it's not like I was begged to go to Anna Strong's graduation party a few months back."

He said it like a joke, something light and breezy before he turned his attention back to showing George just how great Baby Ben was at holding himself up on the edge of his crib.

Ben thought as hard as he could, traced back through every conversation he'd had with her - once, twice, sometimes multiple times a month but on his life he couldn't say what she'd even graduated from.

Despite assurances that it was fine, and a short scuffle, Sam managed to snatch the bill from Ben's hands - claiming Ben can get the next one.

The next one.

Why the thought made him half-queasy, half-comforted, he wasn't sure. Next one. There'd be another.

He didn't hug him, but gave him a quick affectionate clap on the shoulder.

"Next time you're in town, or if you're up by Hartford," he'd said, scrawling his number on a napkin and pressing it into Ben's hand, "lemme know, I'll bring the kids by too."

Ben's been playing the evening over in his head for the last few hours. He's been thinking about it since Sam drove off, since George let that visible tension unwind millimeter by millimeter. Since they got back to their hotel and since George pulled him into the shower and kissed him so hard and so long and told him how proud he was of the progress he's made.

George snores into the pillow next to him, arm winding around Ben's stomach as he shifts minutely closer despite the heat.

He'd asked Caleb about it, firing off a quick text before hiding his screen face-down on his leg as if there's something to be ashamed of. He's been busy, she's been busy. It must've just slipped her mind to tell him that she was doing something. Though, admittedly, Ben isn't sure why he didn't just ask her. Just as likely to pick up, just as likely to tell him - but hovering his thumb over the send button for her number felt like some sort of ending he didn't want to accept.

It's not like he wants to be so far disconnected from his friends lives that he didn't know Anna had gotten her masters, it just happens with the distance. It just happens, right? A natural sort of ebb and flow with conversation and communication.

He's convinced of it. So why is he still lying awake, staring at the stucco ceiling? He should be dreading tomorrow (or, later today he thinks as he checks the angry red numbers on the bedside alarm clock) not the potential for grabbing lunch with Anna and having to face down all the things he don't know about each other anymore.

The seconds crawl by into minutes and with sleep nowhere on the horizon, Ben quietly detangles himself from George for the second night in a row. This time, he doesn't budge, probably far too genuinely exhausted. There's a tug of guilt in Ben's gut as he pads his way to the scratched and battered corner table, his laptop neatly shut in the corner of it.

Ben's not sure what drives him to search it first, but he types in the name of his school in the search bar and steadily drips down into the spiral of announcements and articles. Principal Morris retired, Knox took his place, Ben's position was filled ages ago by another young teacher, someone named Lewis with bright, smart eyes, standing next to the recent debate-team winners in a newspaper clipping.

The steady dripping turns to a flood, the last class Ben taught graduated that spring, the building the first apartment he had was in was renovated into some newer high-class housing, his favorite restaurant from his crap-food college days went under, replaced with a bistro.

Things he used to care about, gone or changed or given new life all while he wasn't looking. He leans back in the chair, scrubbing a hand over his face. What did he expect? Honestly, Ben doesn't actually know - he couldn't have expected shit to stay the same, as small a town as it is, it's a town. It's a place filled with people who never knew his name, who never knew who Nate was, just because his life screeched to a halt doesn't mean anyone else's did.

It feels, vaguely, like someone's ripped the warm blankets off him in the middle of a cold December night and, despite the heat of the hotel room, Ben shudders. The laptop closes with a click as he pulls himself upright. The world kept going as if nothing happened.

He grabs his key to the room off the table, navigating by distant streetlamp to find some socks.

Who's he fucking kidding? The reason Anna never told him about her going back to school was because he never fucking asked. He never asked how she was, what she was doing, how was Selah and Abe and Mary all were.

He just needs to get out, he needs to clear his head, he needs to think. He scrawls a note, rushed and last-minute, for George in case he wakes up and creeps out the door, down through the lobby and onto the sidewalk.

The thing about New Haven, is how small it really is. Sure, the first time Ben saw it, on a college tour with his mother, he was amazed. Setauket was nine square miles of nothing, crammed with barely over fifteen thousand people, in comparison, New Haven was sprawling and bursting with energy and people.

He tries to think back, but he can't quite remember when exactly the novelty wore out, when all the same shops and series of things became redundant but it's harder to remember times when he didn't think of it like that. Pushing eight years in the same town makes everything washed out and drab, but there's a sort of familiarity to it that Ben was sure he was exhausted by.

He walks, though, through the settled-down night, around some college kids shouting down the street. Not as quiet as Virginia, but then again, what's quieter than the middle of nowhere? Where he can't even order a pizza without waiting *way* too long and he can only dream of having Chinese delivered when he doesn't feel like getting off George's couch and either helping him cook or letting him cook.

Okay but he wrote that off ages ago as just being spoiled by the city, he can't actually *miss* it, can he? He can't miss a place riddled with memories, he can't miss a place the same way he misses his friends, that's absurd. Maybe he just misses how nice it felt to be somewhere he knows. His feet

take him on long-remembered paths, around theaters he used to frequent and parks he'd take his morning run through.

It'll be fine, though. Because soon, the day after tomorrow even, he'll be back on the road, squeezing George's hand over the center console and well on his way back to his little, drafty, house. Where he can sit with Mopsey on his lap and fix up what needs fixing and work with Gilbert and just do the same thing again the next day.

And the next day.

And the next day.

Fuck. Even thinking about it makes his arms hurt and his stomach twist up with dread - he steadies himself with a hand on the metal gate that lines the sidewalk, white-knuckled grip as though someone might come along to drag him away. He doesn't want to dissect the realization that winds itself through his ribs, he doesn't want to think about it, he just wants to focus on the next step. The next place.

The next thing he's got to do. It's stupid, and silly, because he knows where he is. He knows what's just around the corner and yet, how his legs managed to direct him to a place he's only ever been once before is beyond him.

Maybe he can convince himself that this is it, this is the reason he can't let go. And it makes sense, the apartment he and Nate shared is a stone's throw away, the college isn't that far either and the same memories he tried to escape are now weighing him in place. And then the graveyard is just a few streets down.

He meant to visit before he left, he really did. But he didn't. He didn't visit the first time their anniversary circled around, or the first time his birthday came. He just... couldn't.

It's awful, he's awful, and he knows it as he follows the path he can too easily remember walking numbly in his black suit almost two years ago, for the first - and until this moment, only - time. The sun's already starting to rise by the time he finds it, nestled between two other worn-down headstones.

Nathan Hale

Son, Brother, Friend

The grass is damp, but Ben can't think of anything else to do but sit. Standing, looking down at that grown-over rectangle of dirt, is weird. Sitting, well it isn't better but it's something else. Makes him less restless as he chews on the inside of his cheek.

"So." He has to pause, clear his throat, glance over his shoulder with that sudden wash of fear that someone might be watching him talk to a granite slab. He picks at the grass instead. "I meant to bring you flowers, but I also meant to leave at a decent hour and get some sleep last night."

"But I just, it's just that, well, okay you know what, let me start over." He takes a breath, one that sticks in his lungs and sinks down deep. "Do you know how much I've wanted to talk to you? It's crazy because if I could talk to you, then I wouldn't need to, I wouldn't be in this place where these things are happening because you'd be here still. But, if you were still here then I'd never, I wouldn't've, y'know."

He sniffs, tears up another blade of grass just to give his hands something to do.

“You’d like him, Nate, I promise. Not that you ever had problems liking people, or getting them to like you and you should’ve seen George with Sam today, well yesterday, they were talking about Sam’s kids and I couldn’t stop thinking about how well you would’ve gotten along. And even if you didn’t, you’d like him because I like him or, I mean, I hope you would.” His head bows and he doesn’t bother scrubbing at his wet cheeks yet.

The wind doesn’t even blow in response and that empty, cavernous feeling in his chest just echos instead. “I miss you, Nate, I miss you so much that sometimes it still feels like I can’t breathe. I miss you so much, and-and I love you, I *still* love you and I can’t stop. I can’t stop missing you and I can’t stop loving you and I just wish I could talk to you again, about this, about how to move on, because I’m trying, fuck, I’m trying so hard. I just, you were everything to me and now you’re gone.”

His voice cracks, splintering as he draws his shoulders in, wrapping his arms around himself as tightly as he can. “I don’t know if I love him, I know I don’t want to let him go, and I need him, and he makes me feel as close to okay as I can get but, I just, I love *you*, and I don’t know how I can do both. I don’t know how I can move on, if I can move on or fuck, if I even really want to.”

“I used to hear your voice, in the back of my head, telling me what to do and how to do it and I know it stopped because I can’t remember what you sound like anymore. I don’t know why I’m telling you that, I don’t know why I’m even here, talking to you like you can respond, like you can tell me what to do this time, like you can tell me it’s okay to like George, like you can tell me that it’s okay. That I’m okay and you’re okay.”

This time, when he trails off, he doesn’t start again. He just lets the quiet hover, blinking through the tears he’d refused to rub away, listening to the distant whir of traffic. He doesn’t know how long he must’ve been sitting there, silently tugging at a few more strands of grass, pulling apart a leaf that had stuck in some dirt.

There’s some part of him that thinks he might actually feel better, but just as much, there’s plenty of him that doesn’t.

He doesn’t turn around at the footsteps rustling behind him, nor at the body that sits itself down with a little noise of effort.

“Got my note, then?” Ben asks and George hums an affirmative.

There’s another stretch of silence between them, and they fill it with movement. George’s arm settles easily around Ben’s shoulders, pulling until he’s resting his cheek on his shoulder, and his hand rubs down his arm. “It’s his birthday,” he observes, quietly.

“Yeah, it is.”

“May I?”

A one shoulder shrug seems to be all that George needs, he brushes his lips on the crown of his head before settling in and addressing the headstone in front of them. “I’m very glad Benjamin had you in his life, Nathan, and if you were even a fraction of the man he tells me you were, than I would have been honored to know you as well...”

He doesn’t stop, and Ben, closing his eyes and feeling that soft breeze soothe away the heart dredges of summer heat, doesn’t stop listening.

Chapter End Notes

We're Almost There!!!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

It's the end of the For Here Is Rest linear narrative. The last chapter will be the Epilogue, which if you're really tired of me, you don't have to read it. It'll just be warm and fuzzies.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Waking up alone, for George, is not anything that could be considered new, by any stretch of the imagination. Normally, it's a predictable endeavor. He stretches up over his head, then rubs down his face, scratches Mopsey wherever he can reach and mentally prepares himself for the ache in his back that tends to accompany most mornings. He slept solidly, better probably than he has in weeks and he can't pinpoint the reason why it fills him with a strangely sickening dread until he his fingers brush the twisted, empty, sheets beside him.

Ben.

That is new. He's never up before George, who was never able to crack the habit of waking up at dawn, even if he, admittedly, wasn't exactly doing any sort of farm labor anymore. Or any labor for it. Even early in the mornings, squeezing in a some moments to kiss and touch and simply be together before Ben was called away to work (though, work would imply he'd accept any sort of payment) and Gilbert wedged himself right between them to get down to brass tax, always blissfully ignorant of the moments he's shattered.

It was the first hint that something was off. The second, was (despite how awful George feels even recognizing it) how soundly he'd slept. It isn't Ben's fault, there's a sort of adjustment that comes from sleeping beside someone when you haven't for years. George isn't quiet used to the weight on his chest, or the hair tickling his nose, or the tossing and turning or the sad little whimpers.

It isn't his fault, of course not. George wouldn't blame him for that, but he also wouldn't tell him how each night in this hotel George spends a few too many hours soothing the terror-wracked tremors away and watching his face contort into pinched, upset frowns, lit only by the distant street lamps.

More things Ben doesn't know, more things, George knows, that Ben never will. It amazes him, sincerely though, how much younger he looks in the interludes between nightmares. Like decades wash off his features. He hardly looks twenty-five, let alone creeping up on thirty like he is.

Though, regardless of thoughts and feelings and early-morning musings on just how beautiful his Benjamin is, it doesn't change the fact that when he wakes up, Ben is gone. At first, he doesn't worry.

There's a million logical reasons Ben could be gone. He could be just in the bathroom, down grabbing coffee or breakfast or taking a walk to clear his mind. Ben could be anywhere doing anything.

He doesn't worry, until he finds the note.

“G,

I didn't want to wake you up. I couldn't sleep, so I went out to the graveyard for a bit. Feel free to join me whenever.

-- Benja.”

There's no time, no other information but the loopy, rushed scrawl - strikingly different from his typical neat-lined, if faintly curvy, script.

Part of George knows how this should go. He rushes, barely pulling on his pants and shirt and brushing his hair out with his fingers. He drives straight to the cemetery, through the early light and the lazy morning crowds and scoops Ben into his arms and kisses his hair and holds him. He should do all those things, a picturesque image of a beautiful culmination of the last year of their lives. There the scene would close and that would be it, the credits rolling as the story comes to an end.

George sits on the edge of the bed instead. He fingers the edge of note and wonders, idly, how far Ben was to leaving when he decided to write it.

He isn't stupid, despite what people tend to think of rural farmer Virginians, he can feel the pull of the city he can see the way Ben looks around so wistfully, that pang of longing in his voice when he talks about what it was like living here. No, George can see what he's been dutifully trying not to.

Gilbert had pulled him aside just a month or so ago, pink-cheeked and wringing his hands as he admitted, in so many words that he and Adrienne were trying for a baby and was in desperate need of reassurance that he would be a wonderful father. “*I want to be a good father, like you,*” Gilbert had said, once George had wrapped up the rail-thin boy in a tight, brief, hug.

But despite the excitement, George had laid awake that night, knowing that they'd never raise a child in the cramped guest house. Chances are, they'd look back towards France, or perhaps if he was lucky, they would move to DC instead, closer to Alexander and Betsy instead of a whole ocean away.

He can feel the slow ticking of the clock, first Martha was gone, then Alexander. Gilbert. Adrienne. It only makes sense that Ben would be next, after them all, leaving him alone with nothing but Mopsey sitting dutifully at his feet and thousands of peaches growing more overripe by the second. There should, he thinks, be an ache inside him instead of the heavy emptiness of resignation.

He gives Ben a little under an hour on top of however long he was asleep for before he heads out. There's no real rhyme or reason to why he waits so long, to why he twists his wedding ring around his finger time and time again, as if Martha would sit herself beside him, cover his aged, weathered hand with her own delicate one and tell him what to do.

She was always magnificent at that, of course he only really noticed once he learned how to listen. She'd probably tell him to get off his ass, grab his collar and drag him down to her level to tell him that he better start communicating if he wants this relationship to go anywhere.

It dawns on him, belatedly, that he doesn't think she would've minded at all.

He's easy to find, the only one there this early on a hazy summer morning. Though for a moment, George almost misses him. He's hunched over, shoulders curled in on himself and head bowed. It

isn't until he gets a second glance that he knows for sure it's him.

And, for a moment, George sees that kid that shuffled his way onto his property a year ago. Cadaverously thin, looking lank and lifeless. Gilbert had come back up to the farmhouse after helping Ben haul his things inside and finishing signing the rest of his paperwork, wringing his hands.

"He seems as though he is nice," he'd confirmed, after a long silence following George's question of *how is the new tenant?* "Strange and... off.. But nice. I'll invite him to dinner, yes? Yes."

There was a glance, to Adrienne who simply shrugged in equal parts agreement and acceptance.

He sees the kid who was sniffing on his porch, eyes red-rimmed and blood dripping down his elbow while he offers a trembling hand to Mopsey. The blood got his attention the most and his heart stopped when he saw it soaking through the rag tied tight around his hand. He thought, for just a second, just one breath, that this kid had hit all the same dark spots George did ages ago.

When he saw it was just his hand, that gut-clenching horror abated but the fear, he thinks, never quite left. He knew - he knows - he hovered, but he couldn't let Ben wallow the same ways he let himself.

And he knows, he's hovering now but Ben folds into him in ways he hasn't before.

"Got my note, then?"

George doesn't know how long he talks for and honestly, he can't even remember what he said but Ben's eyes drift closed and his breathing evens out from the harsh rasping it had been. It gets too hot, though, and the dew from the grass soaks the seat of his shorts and George just shifts a minute amount, to look at him. Maybe he isn't still the same scared boy that flinched away from him far too often. He's filled out in ways that are absolutely gorgeous, ways that were important and healthy. He's made leaps and bounds, even if he struggled and slipped a few times, and, if he's going to be honest with himself, frustrated the absolute Hell out of George. Though, again in the name of honesty, he could never separate when he was frustrated with Ben versus himself.

It's difficult to not feel like he's failing him, to not feel like he's taking him by the shoulders and guiding him down the path that he followed. The one that leads to shut doors and overgrown, weedy pathways, the one with very few friends that teeter on the edge of leaving him at every conceivable moment. He doesn't want that for Benjamin, but well, a selfish part of him thinks, bitter in the back of his mind, it is lonely at the end of that road.

Ben stirs, shifting slightly, like he can feel the weight of George's eyes on him and blinks those strikingly blue eyes up at him.

"I didn't want to wake you up," he whispers, taking the opportunity to bury his nose in the top of Ben's head.

"Didn't mean to drift off," comes the reply. It's not really directed at George, not as his eyes are drawn back to the headstone, cold even in the summer sun. "I just, I didn't sleep much last night."

He doesn't ask for an explanation, knowing too well that Ben doesn't want to give it. He just gives his shoulder a soft squeeze and hums a gentle, "I know. You need to get some rest though, Ben."

There's a little noise of agreement pressed into his shoulder followed by a long stretch of silence. George is fairly certain Ben's faded off again, comforted by the warmth and the lightness of all that weight he must've just shed by being here. That same heavy guilt George feels whenever he

doesn't visit the patch of trees she wanted her ashes spread under. That illusion of quiet is shattered, though, when George moves to brush back a strand of hair that Adrienne must've missed.

Ben shifts in his hold and, this time, pulls away. "Would you be upset if I slept in the car?"

"It's only a couple minutes to the hotel, I don't mind."

His expression pinches in that way that George has long-learned means that Ben's train of thought had skipped a few tracks, speeding along too fast for his mouth to keep up, and he's trying to figure out where the disconnect happened. Idly, George wonders if Hale could ever keep up, if he could keep pace with that rapid-fire mind just as easily as he could would the rest of Ben's brilliance.

It's not a productive thought to ruminate on, but it's what George has.

Eventually, Ben gets there, like he always does. "I meant, I want to go home."

Oh. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm... I just want to go home. We did everything we had to do, there's no reason to stay."

There's a million reasons to stay, he wants to say. There's that library you were talking about, the one that's far better than the little local one in constant disrepair. There's the pizza place you wouldn't stop telling me about. There's Anna Strong and Caleb Brewster. There's your brother, your nephew and niece, your *family*. There's a history here, and there, well, there's only him.

Ben can sense his hesitation, George knows this, but he curls those ridiculously long fingers around George's and squeezes. "I mean it, I promise."

###

Ben sleeps in the truck literally better than he has in months, drooling with his pressed against the glass. He wakes up with his mouth dry and gross, so he's pretty sure he was even snoring too. He doesn't actually know why he slept so good on the bumpy trip back to Virginia, but he feels ninety pounds lighter. He feels less like he's constantly dragging some dead weight behind him, he feels... not totally unchained from some distant yoke but he feels looser.

He doesn't wake up until they're pulling up to the farmhouse and even then it's a bleary sort of consciousness. "We didn't stop?" He mumbles, still trying to get that taste out of his mouth.

"We did," George corrects, voice farther away than it should be, "twice, in fact. I tried to wake you up but you seemed fairly resilient to the idea."

That could be true, he wouldn't put it past himself. Not that Ben remembers it, of course. George's voice is distant because, in whatever long, exhausted blink, he'd managed to get out of the car and stretch a bit before grabbing both of their hastily packed bags. "If you want to wait here," he says, shifting one onto his shoulder, "You look to tired to walk all the way back to your place. I'll drive you if you give me a minute."

As tense and strained as this last week was, Ben has to admit he was a little spoiled. He had a body beside him every night. And not just any body, he had George. He had that solidity, that warmth. He had arms wrapped around his waist and a nose in his hair. Even if he was being difficult about it, even if he was being hard to want, George was there. Every night.

He's too goddamn tired to think about what that bursting of heat in his chest means. He's too

goddamn confused, too drained from that morning. His brow furrows. Was it really that morning? Admitting that maybe, just maybe, he could let himself be in love? It feels like both moments and decades ago at once. He sniffs and rubs his face. How does George put up with him?

Ben's fairly certain he's already left, walked back to the farmhouse with his keys in hand, but when he slides out of the car, George is still there, some unreadable expression on his face while he looks out at the house.

"Whatcha thinkin'?" He rocks on his heels, a little off-kilter, as he asks. George starts, clearly not expecting Ben to be there and Ben feels a little smile curl into the corners of his lips.

George looks back at him then over at the house. "It's an old place," he admits, like it's new information. "I was thinking about how long I've lived here, everyone I know here."

"Do you like it?"

"Here?"

"Yeah."

He thinks, and Ben thinks about what his answer would be. He likes the little town, or at least the few people he's met enough times to know them and who weren't awful people. He likes the food, the stars on a clear summer night, the lake, the horse-riding lessons with Adrienne that usually end in catastrophe. He likes waking up early on his days off to the sounds of heavily accented whooping and the thunder of hooves as Gilbert loses another horse race against his wife. He likes Alex's sharpness and Eliza's unending kindness that wraps around a sort of motherly firmness. He likes the market, likes the work, his little house down a worn-down dirt road.

He likes George.

And if everything else ended and everything else stopped, he'd still like George enough to be here.

He misses his home like a lost limb sometimes, but he's fairly certain he'd miss George more.

Beside him, George takes a breath, "There are things I like more."

There's another distant silence between them, and he takes his hand and leans his head on George's shoulder. They survived that last week together and they survived much more apart but, the question lingers on the tip of Ben's tongue too long for him to ignore. And there was a time when he was absolutely certain that asking it meant defeat, but now he just needs to know, he just needs to hear it: "We're going to be okay, right?"

George presses his lips to the top of Ben's head, not kissing him, just lingering there. The way does when he's putting all the words he needs together, when he's adjusting and changing his phrasing to make it as clear as possible. Ben waits patiently, thumb rubbing the back of George's hand.

"I think so, Ben. I think this is the right direction."

It's enough for tonight. They stay like that for a few more beats, before George pulls away a fraction and shifts the bag on his shoulder. "Let me put this inside and I'll take you home," he says, already starting to walk away - but Ben gives their joined hands a little pull.

"Do you think I could stay instead?" If he never forgets the look on George's face, that's fine by him. Some momentary shifting of awe and confusion at once, his lips move like he's trying to say a hundred things at once.

He settles on, “Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay folks, it's been a long, tearful, long, long, long journey here. I'm so glad those of you who stuck around did, and those of you who are only reading the mostly-completed version, thank you as well.

I love each and every one of you and your views, kudos, comments, messages and thoughts all mean the world to me.

Chapter 26

“Ben, have you seen my keys?”

“Where’d you last see them?”

“If I could remember, I wouldn’t be asking where they were.” George materializes in the doorway of the master bedroom, one brow raised as Ben re-folds the blanket he’s been working on for upwards of ten minutes now to try to see if he can force it into the box with all the others this time.

Ben doesn’t even need to look at him to know the look he’s getting. One brow raised, lips practically quivering as he tries not to smirk at the sight of him struggling and honestly, he doesn’t need it right now. His back protests as he straightens up and shoots George a look that he hopes is properly withering over his shoulder. “Did you check your coat pockets?”

“Twice.”

“What about on top of the washer?” Ben knows he’s right when George leaves him to his boxes. The bedroom was one of the last things they’d packed, and one of the last things they had yet to move over. Chiefly, Ben thinks, because of the arguments it spurred on whose belongings to bring. Ben wanted his mattress, George thought it was too soft. George wanted his nightstand, Ben didn’t like how much it wobbled.

Nothing big quite got in the way of it all yet, at least nothing absolutely world-ending. After getting back from Connecticut, he lasted a few solid months before the isolation started to make him itch. George tried to placate him whenever he could, a few awkward and stiff dates-that-couldn’t-look-like-dates on the town turned into him accompanying the trio at the market every few weeks. It was sort of funny having everyone double then triple-take George as he loomed over everyone else in the back of the stand. At least, it would be if that straight-backed frown didn’t follow him home every night. If he didn’t rub his hands over his face, exhausted and drained by the time it was barely eight.

“I’d be fine,” he admitted one night, *“If it wasn’t these people.”*

Really, nothing was as big as their last real fight. Adrienne had announced that she was pregnant with Gilbert standing behind her looking equal parts excited and like he might vomit up his heart. George had gotten this look, turned away too sharply for Ben to decipher what it is, and the next week was dedicated to shuffling papers away and hushed conversations with Gilbert and refusing to tell Ben what they were about. Ben had pulled him away, asked what it was but he shrugged it off - not important. Just business things. Nothing Ben needs to know.

It all came out in a heap. Ben was so angry, so frustrated his nails bit crescents into his palms and his chest heaved with righteous indignation. So many questions that George refused to answer: Why the whispers, why the cancelled dates and last-minute changes in plans, why did Gilbert and Adrienne stop talking about finding a new place with the baby’s due date creeping closer, why the long phone calls that George takes in the bedroom while Ben’s sprawled out on the couch?

What’s going on?

Why doesn’t he trust him?

“When I tell you you don’t need to know something, it means you don’t need to know something, Benjamin. You do not involved in every decision my company makes.”

"Then why won't you tell me that? Why do you feel the need to sneak around all fucking day and night if it's just stuff for the farm? Things are changing, they're-they're different and no one is telling me why!"

Ben's brow furrows and he pushes those bitter memories aside as he gives up on the blanket. It's going in it's own box, apparently. Maybe he can stack some books on top of it. Make it less like a waste of space. George is taking boxes to the truck, no one's mad anymore, but Ben still feels like this is all some fever dream.

Maybe he really did collapse into a pile of snow two winters ago. Or maybe he's just dreaming in some post-Nate coma he's drunk himself into.

But he can remember the sinking in his gut the moment George said it. That was real. This, the cardboard under his fingers, the emptiness of the farmhouse now that it's been bled of the things they wanted to take.

"I didn't want to tell you until it was sorted out," George had admitted, finally, *"I saw you looking at jobs. At houses up north. The Lafayette's and I have been working on transferring ownership of the farm. Of the house."*

He wanted to go with him, he wanted to finally snip that last thread and go.

And they were going.

There were keys on a ring, there was a man already coming to see the tiny house on the edge of the property, there was a forwarding address to upstate New York, there was a job waiting for him -- teaching again.

There was a classroom with his name on it, four sets of thirty juniors in a high school that would, once the summer was over, be waiting for him to pass out homework and syllabi that are already saved to his laptop. There's a yard, a guest bedroom, enough distance between neighbors to offer far more privacy than city living could ever offer.

He folds the top of the box over with a sense of finality and heaves it up into his arms to haul it to the living room, on top of the others waiting to be dragged out to the truck. He drops it down and instinctively touches just under the collar of his shirt. The ring is just a hard circle, constantly warm against his skin seeing as he virtually never takes it off the necklace it's secured on. It's become a security blanket, of a sort, something he can fidget with when he thinks, rubbing the band and twirling the chain arounds his fingers.

Admittedly, he's noticed George doing the same thing with his. His wedding ring migrated to a chain around his neck the same time Ben's engagement ring did, with a long discussion and a few other options that just didn't seem feasible. This, in the end, was the best option and Ben hasn't regretted it once.

Well, maybe once, the first time he got the chain caught on something.

A little smile tugs at the corner of his lips as he toys with it again, twisting it around his finger once or twice before a little sad whimper breaks him from his thoughts. He glances around a bit before he spots the beagle runt, sitting as close to his foot as he dares to get, ears that are just a little too big flopping as he tilts his head up to Ben and whimpers again, thoroughly unhappy with all the moving around that's going on.

Letting go of the necklace, Ben leans down and scoops the wiggly dog into his arms. "None of

that, Vulcan,” he purrs, letting him wriggle into a more comfortable position nestled against Ben’s chest, “no one’s gonna leave you behind, little guy, promise.”

“Is he getting restless?” George asks once he comes in to the sight. Ben just nods, giving Vulcan a little bounce once he stops trembling in his arms. “I knew he wouldn’t like this.”

“He was abandoned in the woods George, of course he doesn’t like people looking like they’re gonna leave. Isn’t that right, my good boy?” That last part was directed towards the dog, big blue eyes peering up at him from his chest, full of unease. He turns his attention back towards George, though, “I mean, he doesn’t even like being outside our door when it’s closed or when both of us are gone and he doesn’t know where we are.”

George makes that little *hmpf* noise that Ben knows means he can’t counter his point. So instead of trying, he just reaches over and gives Vulcan a little scratch behind his ears. He’s rewarded with a softly tentative lick before he asks, “Where’s Mopsey? He usually calms him down.”

“I think he was out back basking in the sunlight last I checked,” Ben says, setting the Beagle down. That was true, though. Ben had never actually seen quite a pair like Mopsey and Vulcan. Ever since Mopsey had sat there on the back porch, soaked in rain with a little muddy, shivering mess beside him, the two were fairly inseparable. Though, George had often said the same thing about Ben and Vulcan.

Like it’s his fault that Vulcan likes sleeping on him more than George.

Vulcan waits for approval before darting off through the living room and out the open back door, a long series of content yips telling Ben that he’s found Mopsey.

“You think they’ll like New York?” He asks, after a moment, “I mean, after they get over hating us forever for subjecting them to the car ride to Syracuse?”

“It’s not the city, I think they’ll be fine.” George slips an arm around Ben’s waist, pressing a kiss to the back of his ear and making him shiver. “I hear Gilbert told you something with specific instructions not to tell me. What was it?”

Ben smiles, leaning into the embrace slightly, “Only what they’re planning on naming their baby. If it’s a boy, of course, which Gilbert is absolutely convinced it is.”

The grip tightens as soon as Ben starts to slip away, and travels just a little lower down his hips. Ben tilts his head back with a brow raised. “Your brother called,” George states, matter-of-fact, as if he wasn’t being an awful tease. “I believe he was trying to ask me if we were still planning on coming up for Benjy Jr’s birthday but the phone was quickly commandeered by *someone* who wanted to tell Uncle Ben all about her history class she had. He said he’d call back later to get our answer.”

“Tell him we’re in, and that we’ll bring the dogs,” Ben hums, the little break they’re allowing themselves is just making him aware of the ache in his arms and his lower back. He’s itching to both lay down for a bit and just get right back to it.

“Tired?”

“Mmm.” He shifts, resting his cheek against George’s collar and taking in the sight of the room around them.

The photos were packed, or at least the ones they were bringing. There was a division, now that this house was going to belong to the Lafayette’s. Some of theirs had already gone up in their

place, but there are still little squares of paint not yet matching the slight discoloration of the rest of the wall. The painting George had gotten him that first Christmas was gone too, in a box somewhere or maybe already at their new home, he can't remember.

The couch is gone, shuffled away as a donation, but the blanket is with the others. Ben's mugs and books are packed, so are Georges flannel shirts and ancient hoodies. There's a gentle sort of emptiness about it, countered by the warm weight of George wrapped around him, the press of his nose against his neck.

They bask in the moment of quiet for just another slow, lingering breath before the wave of chaos comes back in. "I would say to please keep it to the bedroom, but since there is no bed I feel it is a uh," Gilbert snaps twice before giving up, dismissing the word with a wave, "a point that is not a point."

"Moot." Ben mumbles into George's shirt, not yet letting go.

"Moot. Yes, a moot point. Is there tea left?" He dances around them towards the kitchen. The only thing left in there is a plastic pitcher and a few disposable cups. It had been strangely cathartic, using the first of the early summer peaches to squeeze out a couple batches of peach tea.

Ben only untangles himself from George's hold to join him in the kitchen, much to the low sound of disappointment from George. "Think so. Kinda weird to know it's my last pitcher I'll make from these peaches, huh?"

In the kitchen, Gilbert splutters on his drink and behind him, George makes some sort of half-choked, offended noise. Wiping his chin, Gilbert shoots Ben a half-scathing look. "*These peaches?* You threaten to have others? You believe I will not provide for you? This has been an attack, a strike against my honor and my family. Benjamin, there is no recourse -- we must fight."

It's a full-bodied task to keep the smile off his lips, even as Adrienne waddles in from the back, cradling a basket in one hand, the other resting on the swell of her stomach. "I believe I left you specific instructions to fight no one, no?"

Ben's actual not entirely sure who that's directed to, but both he and Gilbert bow their heads with a little sheepish apology. She hums in acceptance and pushes the basket into George's hands. "I thought you would not wish to leave without some things from your garden. I know Gilbert will keep her thriving, but there must still be a taste of home."

Gilbert immediately falls in to start fussing, ignoring the way she bats at his hands and hushes his huffing that she *shouldn't be doing that much*, in order to push herself up on her toes and leave a gentle kiss to George's cheek.

"If you do not hurry, you are going to be late for dinner with Alexander," she reminds him, moving away and opening her arms towards Ben. He looks to his left. Then his right. Then she gives a little wave of her hand gesturing him closer to wrap those surprisingly strong arms around him. It's awkward, with the bump between them, but they make do. He hugs her back gently, tilting for the two quick cheek kisses.

"Do not forget us down here," she says, one threatening finger pointing down his nose.

"Never could," he promises.

They finish packing up the truck, finish securing it down and giving the house a thorough once-over to make sure there's nothing left that needs to go.

Goodbyes were, as goodbyes always are, full of choked back tears and promises to visit as soon as possible.

And, without much else to do, by the time the sun was starting to set, Mopsey was once again sprawled out asleep in the backseat of the pickup and Vulcan was curled, nervous, on Ben's lap.

"I love you," he says, not for the first time, taking George's hand as they bump without complaint down the weathered dirt road.

End Notes

The Tiny House AU!

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